The Sixth Seal

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The Sixth Seal

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Summary

For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

Notes

This work has been re-uploaded with minor edits. This fic was supposed to be the first part of a series, but when I decided not to continue writing in the Hannibal Fandom I removed it. Someone recently contacted me looking for the fic, so I decided to put it back up. But if anyone starts reading this, be warned, even though it is marked 'completed' the story ends on a bit of a cliffhanger, and I will probably never finish the series.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

He had given Will the choice. Standing there on the precipice he had left their fates in the younger man's hands.

Will had been shaking as he stepped into Hannibal's arms, his body overwhelmed by adrenaline, exhaustion, shock, and pain. It was easy to feel the tremors running through the body pressed so close to his own. First, merely using Hannibal as support to stand, and then turning into a far more intimate embrace. Between one moment and the next, Will relaxed in Hannibal's arms, his unwounded cheek was pressed against Hannibal's shoulder. With Will's face turned towards Hannibal's neck, he could feel every soft exhale of air from Will's lips against his skin.

It was then that he'd noticed Will had stopped trembling.

He held onto the younger man tighter. Pressed his own cheek to the top of Will's head. The scent of the Will's hair, sticky with sweat and blood, his own as well as Dolarhyde's, filled Hannibal's nose. Underneath, it was Will's own unmistakable scent. It was different now that Will was no longer being ravished by the infection in his brain, but it was no less appealing. Beautiful… yes it was… Yes he was. As beautiful now as he'd been delivering the killing blow to the Dragon. A wild thing finally unchained. A wolf, treated like a mere dog its whole life, finally free to be what it was. Hannibal inhaled deeply, savoring Will's scent, and swallowed down the emotion that tried to well up in his throat. He closed his eyes, and waited.

It had always been Will's choice. Hannibal could not say he was surprised by this outcome. Now that Will knew what he, what they, were capable of, Will could never go back. He could no longer deny the truth. All Will could do was make one last desperate attempt to destroy that part of himself Hannibal had set free. To destroy Hannibal as well, whom Will had always been afraid of becoming.

Hannibal didn't fight it. If this was Will's design for them, who was he to interfere? When Will pushed them both over the edge of the cliff he only held the younger man tighter, a part of him almost pleased by this outcome. It would have been very easy for Will to push only Hannibal over the cliff's edge, but instead Will had joined Hannibal in the plunge. Hannibal was content in this. Survival wasn't the only thing important to him anymore. He had changed; Will had been right about that much. Perhaps it had been inevitable. He had given up his freedom for Will, something Hannibal never would have even considered before, simply so the younger man would always know where he was. So Will could come back to him when he was finally ready. Will was with him now, for better or worse, and that was how it was always meant to be. They were finally together, unchained, equals, and Hannibal would rather die now with Will than continue to live without him.

They fell. For an eternity that could have only lasted seconds. Hannibal savored every moment. The warmth of Will's body. The air rushing past them both. The smell of blood and the sea mingling in his nose. The cold water below was unforgiving. The pain of being

suddenly immersed in the icy depths almost blinding. It felt like knives stabbing into every inch of his body at once. Every muscle in Hannibal's body seized in shock, his heart stuttered, and he gasped uncontrollably, water immediately rushing to fill his mouth and nose. Even as the sea welcomed them into her embrace it tore them apart despite how desperately Hannibal tried to cling to the other man.

That alone gave him the will to fight against the frigid clutches of the water. He was prepared to die with Will, but not without him. Hannibal fought against the unforgiving currents, and the waves that tried to dash him against the even more unforgiving rocks of the cliff.

He broke the surface of the cold water with a desperate gasp. It would have been difficult to stay afloat amidst the violent churning eddies even in peak condition, not to mention bleeding and exhausted, but he still fought against the pull which tried to drag him back under. Hannibal grit his teeth as his back hit one of the jagged rocks and grabbed for it. He clung to the rough surface that opened up even more bloody gashes in his hands rather than letting the sea carry him back out. All the while his eyes desperately searched the dark water for Will. Though the sky was growing lighter by the second as dawn approached, there was still was not enough light to locate the younger man.

"Will!" Hannibal's shout was all but lost to the wind and dwarfed by the roar of the crashing waves against the rocks. He shouted again, his voice hoarse from the salty water that he couldn't help but swallow as the sea continued to push and pull around him, threatening to drag him back to the death that he had only barely managed to escape. He might still not escape. Survival instinct urged him to climb the rocks, to drag himself out of the ocean towards safety. But he refused to leave the water without Will. Dread built with every racing beat of his heart. Hannibal still had not seen a glimpse of the younger man in the dark ocean. What if Will was already gone?

No… If anything was going to kill Will Graham it was going to be Hannibal himself. He had not let the Red Dragon take Will. He would not let the sea take him either.

Hannibal let go of the rock that had sheltered him, and immediately the force of the next wave threatened to crush him against it. He stalwartly refused to give voice to his pain, even when he felt the bone in his arm snap as he used it to protect the rest of his body from the rocks. He did not fight the pull of the sea this time as it dragged him back out, instead he took as much air into his lungs as he could and he dove beneath the waves.

It was quieter now. The roar of the ocean muted but not completely gone, rumbling like a great angry beast, furious at his intent. Hannibal would not surrender Will to the sea without a fight. He would search and would not stop searching; he did not care whether or not it was futile. He hit the rocks again, this time unable to stop from crying out in both pain and frustration, but he used the time above the water to take another deep breath before diving again. Hannibal had given Will the choice. Will had chosen to die with him. Hannibal refused to live without him. He would find Will or die drying.

Then, against all odds, his hand came into contact with something that was not hard stone or water. Hannibal gripped it desperately, realizing instantly it was the fabric of Will's shirt. He pulled the younger man's body against his, refusing to think about how limp it was. A dead weight. Holding onto Will with one arm, Hannibal swam hard, forcing them both to the

surface, ignoring the way his muscles screamed in protest. The gunshot wound in his side was mercifully numb, but that was probably only because his entire body felt numb and sluggish. Every second the heaviness of Will's unresponsive body threatened to drag them both deeper into the ocean. Every second Hannibal's fear grew. The sea was refusing to give up its grip on Will, but Hannibal's will finally proved stronger.

When he finally broke the surface of the water, it was almost a shock, so long he'd gone without air that his vision had been spotty, and the sudden rush of oxygen made him lightheaded. He didn't try to force Will's head above the water; he already knew the man wasn't breathing. Instead Hannibal swam as best as he could through the rough crashing waves, dragging Will's body with him. Away from the cliffs and the rocks that would only shred them if he tried to climb them. He knew there was a small shore not far, a path that wound its way back up to his house around the cliffs. He only had to reach it.

He had time. The bitterly cold water ensured that at least, if Hannibal's body didn't give out on him first. Still, it seemed to take forever. Far longer than Hannibal would have liked. Far longer than his abused body felt like it could endure. He probably could have already reached the shore by now if he hadn’t have had to drag Will's unconscious body with him, but he refused to release his grip. Will was finally his, and he refused to let him go.

Hannibal almost didn't realize at first when he started feeling sand and rocks beneath his shoes instead of endless ocean. He ended up tripping at first when he tried to stand on the shifting sediment, getting a face full of water and swallowing even more. He sputtered, ignoring the ridiculous picture he must be making as he coughed, stumbled, and all but crawled his way out of the ocean, dragging Will with him every painful inch.

When he'd managed to drag both himself and Will up onto the shore, the sea finally releasing its icy grip on them both, all Hannibal wanted to do was collapse in utter exhaustion. On his hands and knees he vomited out a frightening amount of water, and almost fell face first in it, but managed to roll to the side just enough to avoid that indignity. There he laid on the rough sand. Gasped like a dying fish on dry land, his heart racing, and wondered if Will would have been amused by that analogy and the picture he made.

Thinking of the younger man pushed Hannibal back into action despite how his entire body screamed at him in protest. Weakly Hannibal pushed himself up on shaking arms and knelt over Will. The younger man's flesh was white where he wasn't covered in blood. His dark curling hair was a tangled mess of saltwater and sand, stuck to his face. Hannibal gently pushed it back, mindful of the bloody mess of Will's right cheek where Dolarhyde had stabbed him. Will's pale blue eyes were open and sightless and his lips were blue. Hannibal was a rational man, but even he wasn't unmoved by the sight, and the lack of pulse when felt at Will's throat. His heart seized in his chest, the fear he'd managed to beat back for so long suddenly gut wrenching, but he refused to give into the instinctual panic. He had waited this long, he wasn't going to give Will up now.

Hannibal's skills as a medical doctor once more came in handy as he began to perform CPR. He also knew that in this case, the near-freezing water was a blessing. It would have slowed Will's heart almost instantly and reduced his brain's need for oxygen. There had been cases of drowning victims in similar circumstances surviving and being revived, even after being

underwater for up to an hour. If Hannibal could resuscitate him, Will's chances of survival from his drowning were good. These thoughts were reassuring as he began chest compressions counting out each one until he reached thirty. Then he tilted the man's head back to open his airway, pinched his nose, and pressed his mouth to Will's. He ignored how cold Will's lips were, the taste of blood and salt, as he gave him two breaths. When Will remained unresponsive he began again, repeating the process over and over. He pushed down on Will's chest quick and hard, not caring about the pain in his arm as he did so. The pain kept him alert. He gave Will more breaths. Occasionally he paused and checked for a pulse. He refused to panic and ignored everything else. Nothing else mattered. Not the sea. Not the sun rising over the horizon. Not the threat of capture the longer they remained. Not his own pain and growing weakness. Nothing.

"Will…" He refused to believe that Will was gone. Will would not have left him. Not now, not after everything. Will had expected to die with him. He would not let Hannibal go on without him. They would either live together, or die together. There was no other option.

"Please…" Hannibal had not begged anyone for anything for more years than he could remember, "Will, please…"

He was almost startled when Will's body suddenly lurched beneath his hands, and water erupted from Will's mouth as his lungs tried to expel the fluid in them. He was not so surprised however that he did not act immediately to turn Will to the side so that the young man wouldn't choke on his own vomit. Hannibal used his fingers to help clear away the debris from Will's mouth and closed his eyes in relief when he heard the younger man's first pained gasp for air.

Chapter 2

Neither of them was out of danger yet. The only question would be whether the hypothermia or the wounds inflicted by the Red Dragon would kill them first. Though Will was now breathing shakily, he was still unconscious, and pale as a ghost. His skin was like ice to the touch. Hannibal knew that he was not faring well either. Though his lowered heartbeat might be helping limit blood loss from the bullet wound in his side, he could no longer feel his hands. Adrenaline and sheer force of will weren't going to sustain him for much longer. He wasn't shivering, as his core temperature had already dropped dangerously low, and he was weakening fast. It was all he could do to focus his thoughts into some coherency when all he wanted to do was collapse onto the ground beside Will and close his eyes, perhaps forever.

Hannibal shook his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. He needed to get them both back to the house, warm, dry, and tend to their wounds. He focused on Will's pale features and forced himself once more into motion despite his body's cries for rest.

This wasn't the first time he'd needed to carry Will Graham in his arms. The most memorable time, of course, had been three years ago when he'd taken an unconscious Will away from Muskrat Farm. It had been difficult then, and the circumstances were vastly different now. At that time Hannibal had been in peak physical condition and his wounds sustained by Mason Verger's men were not nearly as debilitating as now. But even without his wounds weakening him, inadequate nutrition during his incarceration had affected him. He was realizing just how much as he lifted Will's body into his arms and nearly dropped the younger man as he struggled to his feet. It was a challenge despite the fact that he could tell Will too had lost weight during the last three years, perhaps also due to lack of nourishment that Hannibal had once provided him on a regular basis.

"That will have to be remedied, dear Will," Hannibal murmured, more to himself than the unconscious man in his arms, as he stumbled towards the rough path that would take him up the cliff side back to the house far above.

It was slow going. Far too slow. The rough steps cut into the rocky cliff were uneven and his legs were uncooperative. He stumbled far too often and had to stop to catch his breath more than once. He could barely manage to hold onto the precious burden in his arms, and did not dare to set Will down even for a moment's rest, knowing he probably would not be able to lift him again. It was probably a miracle that he had not already slipped and fell, sending them both back down to the bottom painfully, and most likely fatally.

Hannibal spoke softly to the younger man, hoping even unconscious, his words might reach Will. His words slipped back and forth between English, French, Lithuanian, Greek, and even Latin a few times. He was not even sure himself what he was saying half the time beyond soft encouragements, both to himself and to the unconscious man in his arms, "Stay with me, Will. It will be all right. We're almost there."

He wasn't sure he believed that himself.

He held Will as close to him as possible, hoping to share what little warmth between them he could. He took comfort at the ragged cool puffs of air that he sometimes felt escape the younger man's lips. Proof that Will was still alive. Still breathing. Still with him.

Hannibal was shaking by the time they finally reached the top of the cliff. His legs felt weak and threatened to give out beneath him with every step he took. He was stumbling even more often now, and surprised that he was even still upright at this point. The only warmth he felt was from the blood dripping steadily down his front and back. He had to admit, it had been an excellent shot. Meant to incapacitate, but not kill immediately. The velocity had probably only slowed slightly by the thick glass window behind Hannibal, but at least it had gone through him cleanly. If the bullet had still been inside him he would probably be dead already... but at least the wine would have been saved. It was a shame. He had very much been looking forward to tasting that particular vintage. He had been saving it for a special occasion after all. He would have to ask Will later how it had been, since Hannibal had not even had the chance to take a sip.

Hannibal laughed softly at the strange paths of his thoughts, then cursed under his breath as he tripped and fell hard against a tree, the pain in his broken arm making him see white for a few moments. He blinked and shook his head to clear it. At least he hadn't dropped the younger man in his carelessness.

"Forgive me, Will," Hannibal whispered under his breath in apology. "Not much further now."

It was true. He could see the house now through the trees, the bright lights still on inside. The sky was much lighter now, though the sun had still not yet broken over the waters of the Atlantic. The brightly lit house against the darkness of the surrounding forest reminded Hannibal of how Will had once described his old home in Wolf Trap. A lone ship adrift on still dark waters. Promising safety. He could certainly understand now why Will might have felt that way.

Everything was as they'd left it. Hannibal barely spared a glance towards the body of the Dragon he and Will had felled together as he went inside. Perhaps later he would give the body of Francis Dolarhyde the honor it deserved, but for now Hannibal had far more immediate concerns. He walked as quickly as he was able past the broken glass, the spilled wine, and blood on the floor of the living room, directly towards the master bedroom and the large bathroom attached. He did not stop until they reached the walk-in shower stall, and only then did he gently lower Will down onto the cold tile floor.

Under normal circumstances he wouldn't even consider doing what he was about to do, but unfortunately time was of the essence. There was no telling if, or when, Jack would show up. It would not be easy for the FBI agent to find this place; it was not in Hannibal's true name or anything easily connected to him. But the blood bath left behind in the middle of the road where Dolarhyde had set him free was not exactly subtle. Jack must have been furious when he found out what had occurred. Whatever little scheme he and Will had concocted in an attempt to lure out the Dragon, certainly that had not been it. Hannibal doubted even Will, who had surely been playing all three of them against each other, Jack, Hannibal, and Dolarhyde had not planned on that particular outcome. Jack would be extra motivated to hunt

down not only Hannibal, but his treacherous former profiler. The stolen police cars were not exactly inconspicuous, and there had not been time to trade it out for a less recognizable vehicle. There was no telling what kind of trail Francis Dolarhyde might have left for the police to follow either. They might have days (unlikely), or mere hours. Perhaps even minutes.

“I’m sorry, Will.” Hannibal offered the small apology even though the unconscious young man wouldn’t hear him, and turned on the cold water of the shower. Even though he knew the temperature of the water was low, it still felt scalding when it hit him because his own body temperature was so much colder. Hannibal gasped in shock and Will’s reaction was instantaneous. The younger man shouted in pain and immediately began to thrash in panic when the water hit him. Hannibal instantly laid his own body over Will, practically pinning him in place with his weight to prevent him from hurting himself, as well as shielding him a little bit from the water.

“Shhh, it’s all right,” Hannibal whispered softly into the younger man’s ear, and ran his fingers soothingly through Will’s mess of hair. He used the opportunity to work out some of the dried blood and sand from the tangles. Eventually Will stopped fighting to escape the water and began to tremble faintly beneath Hannibal. That was a good sign. When the water finally began to feel cool to him he levered himself up off of Will and began adding warm water to the spray in small increments. It had to be done slowly. Warming them up too quickly could send them both into shock or even trigger a heart attack.

Deciding that Will wasn’t going to fight to get away from the water again any time soon, Hannibal decided now was a good time to begin tending to their wounds before his own hands started shaking too much to be of any use. Not bothering with the buttons on the younger man’s shirt, as his fingers were still too numb, he simply grabbed and ripped the material up the front, sending buttons flying and clattering against the tile.

Will’s pale chest was a mess of cuts and bruises, some sustained in the fight against the Red Dragon, others most likely a result of the fall and the rocks at the base of the cliff. Most seemed superficial however, so Hannibal turned his attention to the stab wound Dolarhyde had made in Will’s chest. Hannibal bent close while he carefully examined the torn flesh. It looked like the blade had glanced off of Will’s collar bone and had lodged against one of his upper ribs. Thankfully the blade had not been long enough to stab into Will’s lung. It was still bleeding, though not much now. A few stitches was all it would take to close the wound.

Satisfied the wound was not life threatening, Hannibal turned his attention to Will’s mangled face. While extremely painful and potentially disfiguring, the wound was also unlikely to be fatal, but Hannibal checked it carefully all the same. He turned Will’s head gently to the side and used the water to flush away some of the debris that had entered the torn flesh. It looked like the blow with the knife might have fractured Will’s cheek bone, but thankfully the blade had been deflected lower into the roof of his mouth rather than upwards. Will could have lost his eye if that had been the case. Hannibal carefully opened Will’s mouth to inspect the damage inside, again glad that the blade Dolarhyde had planned to use had not been very long. The damage inside was not as bad as he’d feared. Would probably heal well enough on its own. Will’s cheek would need careful stitching to minimize the scarring to his face, so

unfortunately Hannibal would have to wait to perform that until he could trust the steadiness of his hands.

But as he continued to wash away the blood from Will's face and hair he noticed there seemed to be more fresh blood in the younger man's hair than there should be. Hannibal turned Will's head again to search for the cause and cursed under his breath, when he found a rather long gash near the back of the younger man's head. Will must have struck his head at some point, either during the fall or in the ocean. That explained his unconsciousness, but certainly the last thing the younger man needed was a concussion on top of everything else. At least it did not appear that Will had fractured his skull. Small favors.

"As ever, my dear Will, you make life a challenge," Hannibal sighed softly, petting Will's hair one last time before pulling away. He stood and braced himself against the wall of the shower as a wave of vertigo washed over him. Hannibal took several deep breaths and waited patiently for it to pass, then stepped out of the shower when he felt steady enough on his feet to do so. Thankfully what he required, a well-stocked first aid kit, was not far.

He took out of it what he would need, and left the rest of its contents on the sink so they would not become wet within the shower, then returned to Will's side. He adjusted the temperature of the water to be a little warmer, and knowing he would be no good to Will if he bled to death, decided to take care of his own wound first. Stripping off his water logged clothing was not easy, his broken arm only being one hindrance, he found, as he felt a painful tearing sensation along his back when he tried to pull his shirt off over his head. A quick examination in the somewhat reflective surface of the shower door uncovered deep scratches along his back and shoulders, most likely created by the jagged rocks the ocean had beaten him against. One or two might need stitching but that was beyond even his dexterity. The bullet wound was far more life threatening anyway.

Hannibal looked down at the hole in the right side of his abdomen, still weeping blood, though sluggishly at this point which he took as a good sign. If the bullet had hit anything vital he would be bleeding far more heavily. In fact, he probably would have bled to death long before now. He would need to be examined later for internal damage, but for now he'd stitch the entry and exit wounds and hope for the best.

After disinfecting the wounds as best as he could, he threaded the needle and went to work. It was not the cleanest stitching he'd ever done, especially when it came to the entry wound in his lower back, but it would do. That done, Hannibal turned up the warm water yet again, and went to work on Will's chest. The younger man was shaking so much by now he had to practically pin him to the floor once again in order to finish. Hannibal continued cleaning and disinfecting whatever wounds he could, and warmed the water in small amounts whenever it began to feel cool again. When Will's constant shivering had nearly abated, Hannibal determined they had been in there for long enough.

He turned off the – by now – luke-warm water, and Will immediately started shivering harder again. Hannibal paid it no mind as he gathered the younger man back into his arms and made his way as quickly as he could into the bedroom. He did his best not to jostle Will too much as he placed him on the bed, then stripped off the rest of the younger man's clothes. He removed the remainder of his own when he briefly returned to the bathroom for towels, and

then returned to Will's side to dry the younger man off. He bandaged Will's cheek and other wounds, then his own. That task completed, he shut the bedroom door, and turned up the thermostat in the room as high as it would go before returning to the bed. He lay down beside Will and pulled the covers up around them both, then gathered him close in his arms to share warmth. Will remained unresponsive throughout all of this, and Hannibal tried not to worry. He would have to set and splint his broken arm later as he had finally reached the end of his considerable endurance. Barely a few moments after he'd let his head come to rest beside Will's on the pillow, he finally lost consciousness.

Chapter 3

It did look black in the moonlight.

The blood. Some of it was Will's. Some of it was Hannibal's. But most of it was from the man formerly known as Francis Dolarhyde. The Tooth Fairy. The Great Red Dragon. Now...nothing. Just another corpse.

Will stared at his hand, covered in dark black blood. The hand he'd just used to gut a man. Will knew exactly what that felt like. Hannibal had once done it to him, so very long ago it seemed. Another lifetime...

"He knew exactly how to cut you. It was almost surgical. He wanted you to live."

Will hadn't been too sure about that at the time. Especially considering the colostomy bag, though at least it had only been temporary. But Chilton was probably right. If Hannibal had truly wanted him dead, he would be dead. Then again, death was sometimes the more merciful outcome. Sometimes when Hannibal wanted you alive, you wished he'd simply killed you instead.

Hannibal had wanted him alive. Only so that Will could fully experience the pain of losing Abigail all over again. Knowing that it was his fault that she had died. Because he had betrayed Hannibal. Squandered the gift he had been given. Not realizing what he was going to lose until the very end...

Thick blood dripped from his fingers. So much blood on his hands. Garret Jacob Hobbs. Randall Tier. Abigail he might not have killed with his own hands, but his actions had directly led to her death. Fredrick Chilton, death would have been far kinder. Maybe Will had even wanted what had happened; he'd certainly felt no guilt afterwards upon seeing his handiwork. The police officers who'd died simply because they'd been between Dolarhyde and Hannibal. He hadn't wanted that to happen, it hadn't been the plan, but they were still dead because Will had made a deal with the devil. Two devils. Molly and Walter, targeted by Dolarhyde because of him, because Hannibal was, of all things, jealous of the family he had created for himself. Dolarhyde... Hannibal...

So much blood. So much death. Some of it he regretted. Some of it...he didn't. He wanted to feel regret. He wanted to feel guilt. But he didn't.

"This is all I ever wanted for you."

Will looked up at Hannibal, standing over him with his hand outstretched. Beckoning. Welcoming. Hannibal was just as covered in blood as Will was. Much of it his own. Much more of it from Dolarhyde from when Hannibal had ripped out the other man's throat with his teeth. He should have looked grotesque, standing there, blood staining his mouth, soaking the front of his shirt, dripping from the fingers held outstretched to Will. Instead he looked...powerful.

"Why shouldn't killing feel good, it does to god."

He felt powerful too, Will suddenly realized. He could feel it, rushing through his veins like fire, setting his skin aflame. He had never felt like this before. Never so...whole. Complete. It felt good. Hannibal knew it, Will could see it in his eyes. This was what he was. This was who he was always meant to be.

"This is all I ever wanted for you. For the both of us."

His hand was in Hannibal's, and the older man helped him to his feet. He was shaking. Overwhelmed by the powerful feelings battling inside of him.

"Do you see?"

Yes... He saw now... Yes...

Why had he ever needed to ask Bedelia whether Hannibal was in love with him? All he had to do was look into Hannibal's eyes to see the truth. He had never felt anything so profound in his entire life. Nothing so intimate.

"It's beautiful."

It was wrong, and yet nothing had ever felt so right. Killing with Hannibal. Killing for Hannibal. He would want it again and again. He would give anything, sacrifice anything, anyone, to feel this again. But he could not have it. For the sake of everyone he still cared about...

He was falling. They were falling together.

Will was no longer afraid. For the first time in his life. He wasn't alone any longer.

He felt alive.

He'd expected darkness. Instead a bright light burned his eyes, intensifying the pain in his head that felt as though someone had tried to saw open his skull...again. A harsh laugh escaped his throat which immediately turned to a painful wet cough.

God, he hurt. Every inch of him felt bruised and raw. His throat felt like it was lined with sandpaper. His lungs were on fire. A pitiful groan escaped his throat. He felt weaker than a newborn kitten. But he was alive. He had to be, he hurt too much to be dead.

Why was he alive? How?

"Will?" The voice sounded far away, but he'd recognize it anywhere. Too often he'd heard it in his dreams... Even more often in nightmares...

"Hannibal?" Will's voice was weak and hoarse and he barely recognized it as his own. He blinked several times, trying to focus his spotty vision. He felt a hand touch his hair and push

it back from his forehead. It felt cool against his feverish skin, and this time Will groaned in relief instead of pain.

"Will, can you hear me? Open your eyes." Will frowned at the command. He thought he had... But no, he never had managed it fully. It took a lot of concentration and effort, but he finally forced his uncooperative eyelids to part. Unsurprisingly, Hannibal's face slowly swam into view. Or should he have been surprised? Shouldn't Hannibal be dead too?

He certainly looked the part, at any rate. Will had never seen the older man look worse. His skin was pale and he had heavy dark circles under his eyes. His face was scratched and bruised in several places and his hair was a mess. He'd looked better the last time Will had seen him, covered in blood, and exhausted. Yet exhilarated. But it was Hannibal's expression that was the most shocking. Will would have said it almost seemed worried.

"You're alive..." Will whispered, his tone disbelieving. Was this real or was it a dream? A hallucination? Did he want Hannibal to be alive? He wasn't sure.

"I am," Hannibal confirmed with a small nod. Will was silent for a long time, trying to process this new information. Hannibal was looking into his eyes intently. He seemed to be searching for something, but Will didn't know what. His brain felt so...fuzzy, his thoughts sluggish, like trying to crawl through thick clinging mud.

He'd tried to kill Hannibal, the memory floated up through the muck of his memories like a bloated rotting corpse. How he'd thrown them both off the cliff into the sea. He'd seen enough drowning victims in his work to know exactly what should have happened to them. They should have washed ashore, their bodies twisted and broken from the rocks. What was left of their skin gray and peeling, fish and other ocean life having picked at their corpses until barely more than bones remained. Will shuddered at the image that was suddenly all too clear.

He was brought out of the vision by a gentle touch to his forehead, but it still made him flinch sharply, as Hannibal's fingers brushed against the scar there. The last time he'd tried to kill Hannibal, Hannibal had tried to eat his brain!

"Are...you angry?" Will whispered. Hannibal actually seemed surprised by the question.

"No. I'm not angry, Will." Hannibal's words did not reassure him at all. Because Hannibal should be angry. How could he not be? He'd thrown them off a cliff! He had betrayed Hannibal...again. Was he only saying what he thought Will wanted to hear? It wouldn't be the first time Hannibal had lied to him to lull him into a false sense of security. Or maybe he truly wasn't real after all? Surprisingly, that thought filled him with more panic than the idea of Hannibal eating his brain. It certainly wouldn't be the first time Will was haunted by the ghosts of the people he'd lost. Will had tried to kill them both, but what if he'd only killed Hannibal? What if he had survived, somehow, and Hannibal had died?

What if he was alone?

"Han... Hannibal..." Will whispered, horrified at his own thoughts. It was all growing dark. Hannibal was moving away. He tried to reach for Hannibal's hand, anything to keep him

there, but instead of connecting with warm living flesh, all he felt was cold bloated skin that split under the pressure of his grasp, peeling away in his hand. Will stared up in horror at the face above him, Hannibal's, but not as Will ever wanted to see him. Gray skin falling away in chunks, exposing bone and teeth. One of his eyes gone completely, nothing but a hollow socket from which Will could see a small crab dining on what remained within. Will wanted to scream but the sound lodged in his throat, choking him.

"Will? Will!" Hannibal's voice was fainter now, coming from so far away he could barely hear him now.

No, no please. I'm sorry... He desperately wanted to plead, but he couldn't get the words out of his constricting throat. His chest was on fire. He couldn't breathe.

Don't go. Don't leave me alone, please.

But in the darkness there was no one to hear his plea.

The strained cough was what woke him.

Under normal circumstances, years of instinct would have had him awake and alert to his surroundings in an instant. Instead Hannibal returned to consciousness slowly, for a few moments uncertain where he was and what was happening, a testament to just how exhausted he'd been, and still was. Thankfully the fog around his mind lifted quickly. A glance at the clock on the bedside table as it swam into view told him only five hours had passed since he'd fallen asleep, and his aching body told him those few hours were not nearly enough to replenish his reserves that had been all but depleted.

None of that mattered however when he heard the wheezing cough come again, followed by a painful groan from the man lying next to him. Hannibal was awake then in an instant, as he pushed himself up from his recumbent position in the bed to examine the other man. What he saw did not please him. Where before Will's skin had been pale and cool to the touch, it was now flushed, and the younger man was clearly feverish. His labored breathing also boded ill.

"Will?" Eyelids fluttered in response to his voice, but didn't open. Hannibal hadn't really been expecting a response, so he was surprised when Will actually spoke. Though the weak strained syllables worried him Will was conscious, if barely.

"Hannibal?" Awake and knew who he was. Considering the blow Will had taken to his head, both were good signs.

"Will, can you hear me? Open your eyes," Enough time passed after his words that he wasn't sure whether Will had heard or understood him. But finally the younger man's eyes slid open. Unfocused and glassy, but a quick examination showed even pupil dilation at least.

"You're alive..." Will seemed surprised by this. Surprised but not necessarily displeased.

"I am," Hannibal confirmed with a small smile and nod before he continued his examination. He reached for the stethoscope in the first aid kit and used it to listen to the younger man's

heart and lungs. Will flinched slightly at the touch, but Hannibal paid it no mind. He frowned at what he heard.

"Are...you angry?" Will's question surprised him.

"No. I'm not angry, Will," Hannibal attempted to reassure the younger man. He was concerned. Will might have survived his near-drowning, but there were so many possible complications. The younger man's fever and obviously difficulty breathing pointed towards infection and acute respiratory distress, which could potentially develop into pneumonia. All of which might prove fatal in Will's weakened condition and require medical equipment and treatment that at present, Hannibal was not capable of providing.

Will's growing distress was not helping matters any.

"Han... Hannibal..."

"Will, you must calm down. It's all right." But Will didn't hear him. His breathing grew even more ragged as his eyes rolled back in his head. "Will? Will!"

But Will had already lost consciousness again. His breathing remained strained and uneven. His heartbeat weak and fast like a bird's wings against the cage of his ribs. Hannibal looked down at Will's slack features for a handful of moments before coming to a decision. Shortly, he was out of the bed, dressed, and in the kitchen reaching for his telephone on which he dialed 911.

Chapter 4

The police car arrived first, approximately ten minutes after Hannibal had ended the call with the emergency dispatcher. The two officers had barely gotten out of the vehicle when they were shot by Hannibal using Francis Dolarhyde's gun. He then proceeded to strip both men of their uniforms and dragged the bodies to the cliff to dispose of the evidence. By the time the ambulance had shown up Hannibal was dressed in one of the stolen police uniforms and quickly ushered the two paramedics inside the house where their 'patient' awaited. He killed them in the living room with one clean shot to each man in the back of the head.

That business taken care of, Hannibal returned to the ambulance for what he needed. To make it easier for him to work, he took the time to set and splint his broken arm using some of the supplies he found. What he was truly after, however, was the portable ventilator which Hannibal immediately took from the ambulance and returned to Will inside the house.

He should have thought of this hours ago. Even though he himself had been suffering from severe hypothermia, exhaustion, and blood loss, all of which could impair his judgement. The fact that he'd been able to offer even rudimentary first aid to Will and himself at that time was astounding, but he still felt angry with himself over his mistake. Will had nearly drowned and suffered a severe head injury as well. The first few hours after a near drowning were the most dangerous, any med school student knew this, and Hannibal had simply fallen asleep? Unacceptable. Hannibal could only hope that his oversight had not caused the younger man permanent damage.

Will was exactly where Hannibal had left him. Even though Hannibal hadn't been required to do it in some time, he was able to intubate Will and get him hooked up to the ventilator with relative ease. The younger man's breathing began to ease almost immediately, and Hannibal sighed with relief. He also gave Will a dose of a broad spectrum antibiotic to help fight any infection that might develop and to guard against pneumonia.

It was difficult to tell how much time they might still have. The missing police and paramedics would be noticed sooner rather than later. Hannibal needed to make sure they were gone long before then. So he returned to the ambulance for the gurney and rolled it into the bedroom where Will was resting. He moved the younger man from the bed to the gurney carefully and then rolled Will to the garage where an SUV waited, already packed. It was an older model but still in good working condition. Hannibal had paid the man who'd been in charge of taking care of this property a hefty sum to ensure that was the case.

With the rear seats removed from the vehicle it was easy to get the gurney, and Will, inside the back with plenty of room to spare. Hannibal returned for the heart monitor and other supplies he'd need to care for an unconscious patient from the well-stocked ambulance. More antibiotics, bandages, pain killers, saline, and even a defibrillator, just in case, for emergencies. Will would probably not be pleased with the catheter, but unfortunately it was necessary. He set up a saline drip in the mean time for the younger man as a precaution. Everything else he packed it all into the SUV along with several bags with clothes, fake

passports, money, and everything else they might need to make a quick and comfortable getaway.

Unable to resist one last look, Hannibal went out onto the rear patio where the body of the Great Red Dragon still lay in a pool of his own blood. Blood that he and Will had spilled together. His arrival scattered a flock of feeding seagulls, the birds understandably annoyed by the interruption of their feast. Hannibal sighed in regret, that he and Will would not be able to dine on their first kill together. It was truly a shame, but the meat would be long spoiled by now, even taking into account the cold weather.

Hannibal would have to make up for it next time. There would be a next time. Of that he was certain.

He walked over to the edge of the cliff and glanced down into the churning sea that had almost become their grave.

“How tragically poetic,” Hannibal murmured with an amused smirk. His dear Will certainly had a flare for the dramatic. It was too bad really. Had he not needed to call for the ambulance, it was very likely that Will’s actions might have bought them more time, several days at least, while their bodies were searched for. Though that undoubtedly hadn't been Will's intention when he'd hurled them to their deaths, it would have been convenient. Hannibal had little doubt that Jack would ever simply give up searching until their bodies were found, never believing them dead without seeing their corpses with his own eyes.

But since a ruse was pointless at this point, Hannibal decided to leave a gift for Jack. It took only moments to break open the chest of Francis Dolarhyde and remove his heart, which Hannibal then left in the center of the bed in the master bedroom where the forensic team would find DNA evidence of both he and Will having shared the space.

At the imagined look on Jack’s face when he heard that news, Hannibal smiled to himself as he washed his hands free of blood, humming Bach under his breath. When he was finished, he changed his clothes into a simple t-shirt and jeans ensemble, topped with a pair of dark sunglasses and a baseball cap. He wondered what Will would think if he saw Hannibal’s ‘disguise’? Will probably thought Hannibal was allergic to denim.

All preparations finally complete, Hannibal returned to the car in the garage. He checked on Will one last time to ensure he was resting comfortably, then got in the driver’s seat of the SUV. He fiddled with the radio just long enough to find the nearest classical station, then began to drive.

Though he did not know it, twenty minutes later, another police car arrived at the scene. After one of the rookie officers finished vomiting due to the gruesome discovery, a call was made back to the emergency dispatch, and soon there were many more police cars arriving at Hannibal's secret home. The area was cordoned off. The evidence meticulously gathered by forensic officers. Finally Jack Crawford himself arrived on the scene, and in the waning sunlight the man looked like he’d aged ten years since the last time Hannibal or Will had seen him.

And Hannibal was right; the expression on the FBI agent's face when he heard what forensics told him was nothing short of memorable.

Hannibal drove for most of the day and night. He amused himself for a little while listening to news reports on the radio about his escape. The radio hosts couldn't seem to get enough of repeating his description, and the fact that he was considered armed and extremely dangerous, listing off his gruesome 'crimes' with far too much detail and enthusiasm one would think adequate, given their 'horror'. For his own amusement, and to help throw off the search, Hannibal even called a couple radio stations in order to give a fake sightings of himself.

The road blocks were a little less amusing, but were not too hard to avoid either. He was still ahead of Jack Crawford, if only a little, and Hannibal intended to keep it that way. He would not be caught a second time.

Very little was said on the radio about Will, which was just as well, for now. That was bound to change sooner or later. Hannibal only stopped driving a few times for coffee and once to fill up the SUV's near empty gas tank. The bored teen at the cash register barely even looked at him, even though his face was plastered on the small TV screen right behind her. He smiled and thanked her politely with a perfect southern accent before returning to the SUV and driving away.

He drove all day and night. Then a little while before dawn, Hannibal decided to rest at a small motel he discovered in the middle of nowhere. It was as good a place as any for them both to recover from their injuries. He paid for several days using cash and a fake ID, then returned with the room key to the SUV and Will. He drove the vehicle around to the back of the motel and under the gloom of pre-dawn, unloaded the gurney with Will. He hung the 'do not disturb' sign on the doorknob before locking the door behind him.

Wanting Will to be as comfortable as possible, Hannibal unstrapped the younger man from the gurney and carefully moved him to the one queen bed in the room. Will had been asleep for hours, but he responded slightly to the jostling, moaning uncomfortably in his sleep.

"I'm sorry, Will," Hannibal apologized softly, brushing Will's sweaty hair off of his forehead. Hannibal noted that his color looked much better now than it had before. A thorough examination suggested some improvement in his lung function as well, though Hannibal wanted to keep the younger man on the ventilator until at least he'd woken completely. While Will had stirred a few times during the drive, moaning softly in distress, he had not regained complete consciousness yet.

If the younger man didn't wake again soon, Hannibal would make plans to somehow get Will to an x-ray or MRI machine to better examine his head injury. To see if there was any severe brain swelling or other explanation for the his unconsciousness. This would prove difficult for certain. Not impossible, but Hannibal still hoped it would not be necessary.

What if it did prove necessary? What if he discovered irreparable damage to Will's brain, either from the fall or oxygen deprivation due to his near drowning? Hannibal shook his

head, pushing aside his fear, unwilling to consider that possible outcome yet until he absolutely had to. Instead he would concentrate on what he could do right now.

He took a moment to check his own wound in the bathroom and was pleased with the way it was healing. Hannibal then took a dose of painkillers that wouldn't dull his thoughts, and returned to Will's side. He checked the wound on the younger man's chest first, noticed some redness that spoke of irritation but not infection. He gave Will another dose of antibiotics just to be certain of that. The younger man had enough to deal with as it was. He then carefully peeled the bandage off of Will's face. The wound was still as horrid as it had been, but looked no worse at least. Hannibal decided it was as good a time as any to finally stitch the wound while Will was still asleep and it hopefully wouldn't pain him as much.

Hannibal used a local anesthetic before he went to work, stitching the wound closed with well-practiced ease. He was quick but careful, using the smallest sutures he could to stitch the torn flesh back together. There was no way to keep it from scarring completely, but the least Hannibal could do was minimize it, for Will's sake.

After tying off the last suture he cleaned the wound and placed a new bandage on Will's face. Then he cleaned up the mess he'd made, replaced the younger man's saline bag, and finally pulled a chair away from the small dining set over beside the bed. Despite the normal lack of comfort such a poor excuse for furniture would provide, Hannibal sank into it with a grateful sigh.

He was still recovering from his own wounds, and exhaustion pulled at Hannibal strongly. He wanted nothing more than to lie down beside Will, close his eyes, and rest, but he felt reluctant to do so given his earlier blunders. Even though Will seemed to be resting comfortably now, that could potentially change at any time. Additionally, he would be useless to Will if he could barely function do to sheer exhaustion.

Hannibal sighed heavily, running his hand wearily over his face.

Perhaps he would shower to help wake himself up, then sit up with Will for a while. If the younger man was still sleeping comfortably then, perhaps he would rest for a few hours, and then reassess the situation.

With that in mind, Hannibal forced himself back to his feet with a groan, his joints popping in a way that made him wince to himself. He definitely wasn't as young as he used to be. He made his way to the small bathroom, looking forward to the promise of hot water, and doing his best not to trip over his own feet on the way there.

Chapter 5

"He's watching us now."

Will was certain of it, even though he had no 'proof'. He could not see out into the darkness of the woods surrounding the house. The bright lights within only made reflections in the windows of what was on the inside. Like mirrors. Will could only see himself and Hannibal, but he knew. Francis Dolarhyde had been stalking them ever since he'd left them on the side of the road after massacring their police escort. He could feel now that the Dragon was close. A prickling at the back of his neck, as he imagined a prey animal might feel, knowing that a predator was near, knowing its death was imminent, even though it could not see it coming.

"I know," Hannibal had replied calmly. Always calm. Even when he was now the prey instead of the predator. Even when the window shattered suddenly behind him. Even when the wine bottle in his hand exploded a millisecond later, expensive red wine spilling, wasted, onto the floor. Even when a dark blotch of red quickly began to spread on his abdomen as he fell. There was no shock in his eyes. Pain, yes, but otherwise still calm as his death approached him.

As he'd promised, Will simply stood by and watched as Dolarhyde began to set up his video camera. Still, there was no fear in Hannibal's eyes or voice as he spoke to his would-be killer. Not that Will had really expected there to be any. Stoicism was practically Hannibal Lecter's middle name. He still appeared completely composed when he looked to Will. Not begging. No, never that. Waiting. Hannibal didn't expect Will to stand there and watch him die. Even after all the times Will had tried to kill him. Even though Will had told him he was going to do exactly that, let the Dragon 'change' him. Hannibal didn't believe it then, and he did not believe it now.

"No greater love hath man than to lay his life down for a friend."

Hannibal still thought of him as a friend. Had they ever truly been that? Not in any sense that Will understood the meaning of the word. No, they were much more than that. There was so much disappointment, mistrust, and anger between them, they should have been enemies, and yet somehow they weren't. He hated Hannibal so much sometimes it scared him. Because he knew that hate could drive him to do things he never would have thought himself capable of. But at the same time…

Hate like that could only exist alongside love. Because he had once…and still did to his utter shame…cared about Hannibal so much. That was why Will went to reach for the gun he had hidden in the back of his trousers, concealed by the shirt he wore. If anyone was going to kill Hannibal one day, it was going to be Will with his bare hands. Just as he'd once promised Hannibal.

But to Will's utter shock he found that he could not move. He was frozen in place, wine glass in one hand, the other at his side. He felt paralyzed. He couldn't speak, unable to even blink. All he could do was stand there and watch. Watch as the Dragon 'changed' Hannibal. So

much more gruesomely than he'd done so with the women who were part of his fantasies. He watched as Dolarhyde opened up Hannibal's stomach with the knife and pulled out his intestines. He watched as Hannibal's face was slowly peeled off and eaten by the Dragon, just as Hannibal had once forced Mason Verger to do to himself. He watched as Dolarhyde cut piece after piece off of the older man, starting with his feet and hands and working inwards. Discarding the pieces he did not want, and devouring the rest.

No. This wasn't what he wanted. No, please.

Through it all, Hannibal never made a sound, even though his pain was obvious in the eyes that watched Will. Always watching. Never a flicker of fear in those eyes that bored into Will's. Simply waiting. Waiting for Will to save him.

Yet Will could only watch and scream inside his head for it to stop.

There was a cool hand on his forehead. Gentle. Caring. Fingers ran through his sweat-slick hair in a gentle soothing motion. Almost petting.

"Will. Will, it's all right. You're safe now. You're safe. Just breathe… That's it…"

The voice was warm. Familiar. Comforting. Will wanted to cling to it. To wrap it around himself tightly and never let go.

There was a sharp pinch on his arm, but it faded quickly. A heavy warmth seemed to settle over him.

"Easy now… Just relax…"

He wanted to beg for that voice to never leave him. But it was already fading. Fading… gone…

The table was set beautifully, as always. The dishes were spotless. The silverware was polished to a mirror shine. There was an elaborate floral arrangement in the center of the table, filling the air with a subtle but sweet scent.

He was in Hannibal's old dining room in Baltimore. Will was sitting at the head of the table, the place usually reserved either for Hannibal himself or his 'honored guest'. He was not the only one sitting at the table. Alana was there, and Margot to his left. Jack was placed to his right, along with Bella. Bedelia sat across from him at the other end of the table. Even Abigail was there, sitting on the other side of Margot. Chilton sat directly across from her, and Will noticed with some surprise he still had a face. They were all looking at Will expectantly, as though they were waiting for something.

Hannibal soon joined his guests from within the kitchen. He was dressed somewhat casually, as he usually was while cooking, shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, wearing a simple white apron.

“I must apologize to everyone that dinner is running a little late. But I promise it will not be much longer now,” he said, smiling at everyone. Then his gaze fell on Will, and dread began to crawl up the younger man’s spine as Hannibal approached him. There was a surgical saw in his hands.

“As you can see, my dear Will, my compassion for you is no longer inconvenient,” Hannibal told him before powering on the saw. The sound set Will’s teeth on edge and his heart racing with panic, but he couldn’t move. He could tell that he wasn’t tied down or drugged, no Hannibal would have wanted him to feel everything. But for some reason he still couldn’t move. He couldn’t even scream when the saw began to slice into his skull.

The blood was surprisingly minimal, only a little bit getting on Alana and Jack sitting closest to him. They watched what was happening to him passively. Abigail smiled at him from along the table. Once Hannibal was finished, he turned off the saw and placed it aside. He couldn’t see what Hannibal was doing but he could feel it when the man pried off the top of his head, exposing his brain. Though logically he knew that he shouldn’t be able to feel Hannibal digging around inside of his skull, he did, the pain excruciating, but he still couldn’t scream.

Then suddenly there was another smell filling the room, the smell of sizzling butter and meat. It made Will’s mouth begin to water even as his stomach roiled with sickness. Hannibal was humming while he cooked, adding seasoning to the frying meat with his usual flare. Soon Hannibal was approaching Will with a fork, a still-steaming bit of his own cooked brain caught on the end of it.

“Would you like the first taste, Will?” Hannibal asked politely.

It was only then that Will found he could move, opening his mouth in spite of himself against his will. Hannibal placed the fork inside his mouth and the delicious flavor burst over his tongue making Will want to vomit. The other guests around the table began to laugh and clap in amusement.

Will still couldn’t scream.

Someone was speaking, but it didn’t sound like they were talking to him directly. It was more like they were reciting something. Reading aloud, as his father sometimes did long ago when Will was a child, ill and had difficulty sleeping.

It was not his father reading to him now, Will knew that much. But the same level of comfort he’d felt then, he felt now.

He felt a soft brush against his knuckles, a thumb caressing them back and forth, and the heavy weight of another hand in his own. Will gently squeezed the hand that was holding his. The motion stopped. He missed it immediately. Then the other’s hand squeezed back and resumed the gentle caress.

Will allowed himself to drift away again, knowing he was safe.

He'd never felt pain like this in his entire life as he clutched at the gaping wound in his stomach, trying to stop his intestines from falling out. Will's harsh agonized pants and his pounding heart were all that he could hear. Everything else was muted. That was, until Hannibal spoke.

"I let you know me. See me. I gave you a rare gift. But you did not want it," the words were angry, accusing, and surprisingly hurtful. Though Hannibal's face was almost completely stoic, as it had been even while he was gutting Will, his eyes couldn't lie. He was hurt by Will's betrayal. Seeing that hurt Will in turn almost more than the wound in his stomach.

"Didn't I?" Will countered in a weak shaking voice. He had wanted it. He'd wanted it too much. Didn't Hannibal understand? He'd made a mistake. That was why Will had called him, tried to warn him.

"You would deny me my life?" Hannibal accused him, venom in his words despite the soft tone.

"N..o… No…not your life, no," Will tried to protest, even though it sounded weak even to his own ears. After all, how many times had he fantasized about killing Hannibal? Hadn't he even sent someone else to do it when he'd been confined in the mental hospital? Framed by Hannibal. He'd wanted Hannibal dead then. A part of him still wanted it. A larger part of him didn't, even now, after Hannibal had gutted him both literally and metaphorically.

"My freedom then, you would take that from me. Confine me in some prison cell?" Hannibal suddenly looked curiously at him, *"Do you believe you could change me, the way I've changed you?"*

"I already did," Will replied, a bitter laugh on his next pained gasp. For a moment Hannibal actually seemed surprised by this, but he did not deny it.

"Fate and circumstance has returned us to this moment, when the teacup shatters. I forgive you, Will. Will you forgive me?"

Fear, stronger than the terror of knowing he was dying, filled him at Hannibal's words.

"Don't… don't… N…o… no…"

"Abigail, come to me," Hannibal ordered the girl, holding out his hand, and despite the fear in her eyes, she obeyed. She took Hannibal's hand and he pulled her close, into a near embrace.

"No, please…" Will begged. But Hannibal did not bring the knife to Abigail's throat as he had feared. They simply stood there together, watching him bleed to death. There was no longer fear in Abigail's eyes, only sadness.

"We're leaving now, Will. You won't find us. Ever," she told him plainly. *"Goodbye."*

"No…wait… No…" This was worse, this was so much worse than what he'd feared. He watched as Abigail turned to Hannibal, nodded, and Hannibal began to lead her away from

Will. They walked away together hand in hand, and Will desperately tried to get up, but the pain in his stomach prevented him from doing anything other than crawling weakly. Trying to go after them.

"Wait! Please…don't leave me… Please…"

Yet despite his desperate pleas, neither looked back at him. They left him. Alone.

The room was dark when Will opened his eyes. He could hear the steady beeping sound of a heart monitor, and the rush of air from a ventilator, two things he'd become very familiar with during his long hospital stay three years ago. Both something he'd hoped never to have to hear again. He could also hear the sound of rain hitting the window softly. It was soothing despite his confusion and discomfort.

The room he was in did not look like a hospital room. Even though it was dark and he was having trouble focusing on anything, it still seemed wrong somehow. Plus it lacked the sterile chemical smell of a hospital room, something else Will was very familiar with.

It didn't make sense. Why would there be medical equipment if he wasn't in a hospital? Trying to figure it out made his head throb in time with his heart and he closed his eyes with a soft groan. His head hurt. His face hurt. His chest hurt. His thoughts flowed like thick molasses. He didn't know where he was or what was going on, also a very familiar feeling to him from his days of sleep walking, even though those were long behind him now. It was just as disconcerting now as it had been then.

He tried to shift, tried to get a better view of the room, but the pain that flared up in his neck and face made him whine in discomfort. The throbbing in his head grew even worse, if that was possible. His stomach clenched, threatening to vomit up bile as there was nothing else inside of it.

There was the sound of movement from somewhere beside him. A creak of plastic.

"Will?" the voice was soft, tired, and if Will didn't know any better, hopeful. He moaned softly in response, since it was all he could do. There was more movement. Then a warning, "I'm going to turn on the light. Close your eyes."

Will did so just in time, and even though his eyes were shut he whimpered again at the sudden brightness. The light felt as if it was searing his eyes in his skull even though they were still closed. There were more sounds of movement, a rustle of fabric, and then the light was dimmed.

"All right, now open your eyes," he was ordered. He almost didn't want to. "Will, please."

That soft, almost concerned tone, had Will slowly parting his eyelids in spite of himself. The light still hurt his eyes, but it was bearable. Other parts of him were definitely hurting worse right now. He blinked several times trying to clear his vision, though it didn't really help much.

“Very good,” The elder man approved, “Now, we’re going to see how you’re breathing is without the ventilator. If you can breathe on your own well enough, we’ll remove the endotracheal tube. All right?”

Will nodded faintly. He very much wanted that. He hated the feeling of the tube in his throat. It was uncomfortable at best.

The ventilator was shut off and Will’s lungs strained for a moment at the sudden lack of help, but then shakily drew in a breath. He felt something cool and round pressed against his chest.

“That’s it. Deep breath.”

Will obeyed, or tried to at least. It was hard, but he managed a slightly deeper breath. His lungs ached, and his vision darkened a bit.

“Again.”

The next breath came a little easier. And the one after that. He wanted to cough badly, but knowing that would probably be painful with the tube down his throat, he resisted and kept focusing on his breathing. The stethoscope on his chest moved to several different places and was finally removed.

“All right, then. Let’s take this out.” That prospect made Will want to dance with joy. Not that he would have been able to, in any sense of the word, but still. The tape holding the tube in place was removed from around his mouth and then the tube itself was gently removed. It made Will cough despite his desire not to, and he winced in discomfort. The feeling reminded him far too much of the memory, if it was even a memory and not simply another hallucination, of Hannibal forcing Abigail’s ear down his throat. Will’s fingers clenched vice-tight in the sheets beneath him. Finally the tube was free and Will coughed again, but it was a relief despite the discomfort. A tissue was dabbed around his mouth to clean away any residue of saliva.

Will opened his eyes again, and while his vision was somewhat blurry, it was still clear enough to make out the shape of Hannibal sitting in an uncomfortable-looking plastic chair by his bed. He appeared more worn out than Will had ever seen him, with dark circles under his eyes, disheveled hair, and what looked like several days’ worth of stubble on his cheeks. Still, he was smiling slightly as he gazed down at Will.

“Welcome back, William.”

“Hello, Dr. Lecter,” he replied in a hoarse voice.

Chapter 6

Jack Crawford leaned forward and clicked the pause icon on the video player. The picture froze instantly, and he leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers underneath his chin while he pondered the image on the monitor.

He was currently alone in his office, the door shut and the lights dim. It was very late. Past midnight, not that it really mattered anymore. It wasn't as if he had anyone to go home to any longer. And he wasn't alone in the offices either. Nearly everyone involved in the investigation had been working around the clock for days. At first they'd only been trying to catch the serial murderer known as the Tooth Fairy, Francis Dolarhyde, aka The Great Red Dragon. Now, however, they were hunting a monster far more dangerous.

Again.

Jack knew he was the one responsible for this fuck up. Really, there was no one else to blame. He was the head of the Behavioral Science Unit, though he only held onto that title now by the skin of his teeth, mostly because no one else wanted the job right now. Who else in their right mind would want to be responsible for recapturing Hannibal Lecter, aka the Chesapeake Ripper? Especially when Jack was the one who'd set him free. All because he had trusted Will Graham.

Again.

Jack frowned at the frozen picture on the computer screen. The footage had been recovered at the latest crime scene of the Chesapeake Ripper. The house was not in Hannibal's true name, of course, but by the decor alone Jack could tell that it had belonged to him. God only knew how many other such hideaways the man might have squirreled around the country. They suspected a total of five homicides. In the house they'd found two dead paramedics. They had yet to find the bodies of the two police officers that had been dispatched to respond to the 911 call made from the residence, but they were also presumed dead. They'd also found what was left of Francis Dolarhyde on the back patio.

The video camera had belonged to Dolarhyde. The recordings on the device of his previous victims, as well as Dr. Chilton, proved that much. But it was the last recording that was now paused on Jack's computer. It had begun with a view from the outside of the house, most likely shot from somewhere within the surrounding woods. The bright lights on inside and the many floor to ceiling windows of the residence gave an unobstructed view of the two men who moved around inside.

Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham.

The video showed each man had taken turns showering and changing clothes, first Hannibal and then Will. Then came an awkward 'dancing' around each other, both men moved around the space seemingly casual and yet neither really came within arms distance of the other. The only exception when Hannibal had finally brought out a bottle of wine for the two of them to share. Then the video cut to another scene abruptly. In this one Hannibal was clearly visible

up close in the frame, he was lying on the floor and held his stomach, which bled from what they assumed was a gunshot wound. They also assumed the voice that spoke off camera to Hannibal belonged to Francis Dolarhyde. Hannibal appeared calm during the conversation, but kept looking off camera, at whom they could not be sure, but Jack had an idea.

Then all of a sudden there was the sound of a struggle off-camera and Hannibal's expression changed for the first time from his usual calm mask. First he grimaced in what anyone who didn't know him would assume was pain, but Jack knew better. There was rage in those normally ice cold eyes. Then Hannibal moved. The man got to his feet with difficulty, and in his unsteadiness the camera was knocked over onto its side. Jack didn't believe it was intentional, but it turned out to be beneficial to them.

Though the angle was bad and the video was poor, even after being enhanced digitally, it was good enough to allow them see what had happened next. It showed how Francis Dolarhyde had attacked Will, and Hannibal intervened. The fight between the three men was brutal and bloody. It was impossible to make out the details, given that the light from inside the house did not reach very far onto the dark patio, but even the moving shadows showed enough. How Hannibal and Will killed Francis Dolarhyde, like two wolves working together to take down their prey. How Hannibal had ripped out Dolarhyde's throat while Will practically gutted the man. That part, while disturbing enough, was not the scene currently frozen in time on Jack's computer screen.

No, it was what came after the brutal murder his former colleague had participated in that truly disturbed Jack Crawford. The scene that he could not help but play over and over trying to understand. Where Hannibal pulled Will to his feet, both men obviously severely injured and needing the support to stand, and yet the embrace that followed still appeared far too intimate to explain away as mere necessity.

And then the two men disappeared over the side of the cliff.

Jack didn't know what to make of it. Had the two men merely succumbed to their wounds and fallen? They didn't appear to have jumped, so he didn't suspect suicide. There also seemed to be no signs of struggle, so he didn't think one had forced the other over. They'd simply fallen. Together.

It didn't make any sense, but then when had anything involving Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham make sense? The men's 'relationship' had always been a tangled mess, and really, that was partly Jack's fault. He was the one who'd forced them together in the first place, but how could he have known at the time what that meant? He'd thought he was helping Will when he set Hannibal up as his psychiatrist. Under the 'doctor's' care, Will had even seemed to improve for a time. He was getting results. Solving crimes. Capturing criminals. That's what was important to Jack…and then everything started to fall apart.

Jack still felt guilty about how easily they'd all fallen for it. They hadn't seen Will's sickness. Then Hannibal had framed Will for the copycat murders. Jack had refused to believe Will when the younger man tried to tell him it had been Hannibal all along. When Will had been finally released from the mental hospital, Jack had tried to make it up to him. He'd started to listen. He'd started investigating Hannibal Lecter. They both quickly realized they'd never be able to catch Hannibal using normal methods. Hannibal was too good for that. But Will was

an excellent fisherman and expertly dangled himself out as bait. Jack had let him do it. Encouraged it even. Anything to finally catch the Chesapeake Ripper.

Again, he'd been fooled, but this time by Will. Still guilty for not believing Will once, Jack had believed the younger man too easily. He'd underestimated Hannibal's influence on the younger man. He'd trusted Will's anger at Hannibal to make him go through with the plan. He'd never expected Will to get lost in his 'act' so thoroughly. But, considering what Will was, what made him special in the first place, Jack probably should have. By the time he'd realized he'd been betrayed, it was too late.

Even now Jack wasn't sure if he'd gone over to Hannibal's home that night to arrest the man or kill him. Either outcome would have been acceptable. Jack wondered if Will hadn't betrayed him, hadn't called Hannibal to warn him of his arrival, would it have turned out the same? Bleeding to death in that fucking pantry, the only thing he could think of was how much he'd wanted to spend his last few moments with his then-dying wife. How much he didn't want to leave her. It had been something of a 'wake up' call, or so he'd thought. Jack had been fully prepared to let Hannibal go. Let someone else chase the bastard down. Resign. Give it all up to spend whatever time he had left with his wife.

Then Bella had died…and he received the letter. Everything changed.

He'd wanted Hannibal Lecter dead. He'd chased the man all the way to Europe to do the deed with his own bare hands, and nearly succeeded. He'd told Will that he didn't kill Hannibal because he needed Will to do it in repayment for Will's previous betrayal. It was the only way Jack would ever trust Will Graham again. But then sitting there at that table, unable to do anything but scream while Hannibal started sawing open Will's skull, prepared to feed him the younger man's brain… Again, it was something of a wake up call.

He'd still wanted to kill Lecter when he'd taken the man into custody outside of Will's old home in Wolf Trap. If Jack had arrived on the scene alone he probably would have put a bullet in the doctor's head and claimed self-defense. Instead he'd taken the man prisoner, certain that Hannibal would be convicted on multiple counts of first degree murder and would rot in prison until the day he was executed. Jack had been content that for a man like Hannibal Lecter, a fate such as that would have been worse than a quick clean death, something the man certainly did not deserve.

But Jack had forgiven Will Graham. He hadn't asked too many questions about Will's and Hannibal's capture by Mason Verger, or how they'd managed to escape and end up in Wolf Trap together. He'd put on the report that Hannibal had been holding Will hostage in his home before he turned himself in, even though he knew that wasn't the whole story, or probably even true. He hadn't even asked Will what had gone on between him and Hannibal off the record. He'd simply let it go. Jack figured he owed Will Graham that much at least.

Jack had been shocked, to say the least, when the jury had pronounced Dr. Lecter insane and his custody given to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane rather than a federal prison where he belonged. Or the electric chair. Jack had been further surprised by the very comfortable accommodations that Lecter received, under Alana Bloom's care. Given that Dr. Lecter was responsible for nearly crippling her, he never would have suspected such…generosity. Of course he had his own suspicions of why Alana Bloom, who soon after

Hannibal's capture had married Margot Verger and given birth to a son as the Verger heir, might make special accommodations for Hannibal. Especially as Hannibal Lecter was charged with killing Margot Verger's brother, Mason. But of course Jack could never prove those suspicions.

In the end, he felt like he'd been played for a fool. By Hannibal. By Will. By Alana. All of them. But there was nothing he could do about it. Jack tried to console himself that as long as Hannibal Lecter was in custody, that was all that mattered, but it had never sat right with him.

And then, along came the 'Tooth Fairy'.

Jack had cut his losses with Will Graham. He respected Will's decision to retire and hadn't contacted him for nearly three years. Not until the Jacobi's and the Leeds' murders. The literally cold reception Will had given him had been expected. Jack knew he'd played dirty when he talked Molly into convincing Will to help him with the case. He'd played even dirtier by forwarding on Hannibal's letter to Will. The first one Jack had allowed to reach Will during all of Hannibal's incarceration. He'd known in doing so he was opening up a door that he might not be able to close again, but he'd been desperate.

Jack knew Hannibal Lecter, and he knew Will Graham. Will needed the push. Will was like an addict when it came to Hannibal. He'd known simply hearing from Hannibal Lecter, even in letter form, would put Will back into that 'mindset' better than anything Jack could do or say. It had been a gamble, but one that Jack had been willing to take. The fact that Hannibal had 'warned Will to stay away' would almost ensure the younger man's cooperation, if only to be contrary. Jack knew it. Hannibal had obviously known it too.

He'd never expected, or wanted, Molly and Walter in the middle of everything. Though where Hannibal Lecter was concerned, perhaps he should have expected it. Hannibal had always proved very effective at eliminating anyone he perceived as a threat to him. Jack knew Will would never forgive him for allowing his family to become involved, but on the plus side, it had motivated Will to find Dolarhyde even more. At the time, Jack was willing take any advantage he could get.

Given that Hannibal was responsible for Will's wife and stepson nearly being murdered, he hadn't expected anything when Will had come to him with his reckless plan to draw out the Tooth Fairy, using Hannibal as bait. At that point, Jack had been desperate enough to try nearly anything. He'd let his own ambition and desire for revenge to finally see Hannibal Lecter 'pay' for his crimes, blind him. He still hadn't suspected Will of any ulterior motives, until he'd heard about the massacre on the highway. Six police officers shot to death. Will and Hannibal missing. Jack felt like he'd been played for a fool again, only this time he wasn't sure who was laughing at him. He did not like to think that Will was responsible, but Jack could not deny that something had felt 'off' about the whole 'plan' from the beginning. He'd foolishly trusted Will once when it came to Hannibal Lecter and he'd paid dearly for it. Had he made the same mistake again?

Now with this video footage, the waters seemed even murkier.

The video camera had run out of power so there was no footage of anyone returning to the residence, though obviously someone had. Someone had killed those paramedics. It had been

Hannibal's voice on the recorded 911 call. DNA evidence suggested that both Hannibal and Will were present at some point. But given the equipment that had been discovered missing from the ambulance's inventory, a ventilator, defibrillator, gurney…things that would only be needed to move and treat someone in a extreme medical emergency.

Will's condition was in serious question.

Hannibal had not called 911 on a whim. The man often flaunted his intelligence and perceived superiority, playing games with those pursuing him. Jack could only imagine how much the cannibal laughed while feeding him the very victims of the murders Jack was investigating. But he wasn't foolish. Calling the ambulance, or the police, was dangerous but he'd done it anyway. There were easier ways to get that equipment, but it would have taken more time. He'd needed that equipment immediately for some reason. Jack suspected he needed it to keep someone alive. Maybe that person was Will, who could have been severely injured in the fight with Dolarhyde, the fall from the cliff, or even by Hannibal himself.

Jack felt sick even thinking about how he'd once found Abel Gideon in Fredrick Chilton's home, kept alive, possibly for weeks, artificially while Hannibal cut pieces off of him, and most likely ate them. The thought of something similar happening to Will… It had nearly happened to the younger man once already.

Which was it? Was Hannibal trying to save Will's life, or merely prolong it? It was impossible to predict what Hannibal's intentions toward the younger man were at this point. Jack wasn't sure which option he hoped for, or feared, the most.

Was Will Graham now an accomplice to Hannibal Lecter, or his hostage?

Chapter 7

Will had not remained awake for very long the first time after his fever broke, not that Hannibal had really expected him to. The younger man was still very ill and weak after all. For now the tube had been replaced with a simple respiratory mask, and Hannibal kept a careful watch on the younger man's breathing to make sure he was getting enough oxygen while he slept.

Still, Will's condition was a vast improvement over the last few days, so Hannibal was hopeful, and more relieved than he liked to admit.

The next time Will woke, Hannibal asked him several routine questions to gauge the younger man's mental awareness. He also gave Will a thorough physical examination that he endured stoically. Allowing the doctor to take his temperature, blood pressure, and to examine his wounds without complaint. Sometimes a touch would cause the younger man to flinch slightly but he did not speak unless Hannibal asked him a direct question. He simply watched Hannibal with weary eyes. His tired expression guarded.

"Are you in pain?" Hannibal finally asked, drawing up the covers around Will once more. Will seemed to consider the question for several seconds before nodding. Hannibal left Will's side for a moment and returned with a syringe. He pressed the needle against the younger man's skin. A small smile pulled at his lips when Will did not protest, or even question, what Hannibal was about to inject him with. He depressed the syringe and withdrew the needle, then held a small piece of cotton against the wound to prevent bleeding. After several moments he noticed the younger man beginning to relax and some of the tension left his face as the strong pain killers did their work.

"That should help, though it will probably make you feel tired. You should rest if you can, Will," Hannibal told the younger man as he set aside the empty syringe to dispose of later.

"H… How…long?" Will's voice was weak and rough with disuse, and the young man grimaced as even the slight movement probably pulled painfully at the stitches in his face.

"You've been asleep for nearly four days now. You've been very ill, William. You've regained consciousness a few times, briefly, but you were not lucid most of those times," Hannibal explained. Will gave a small nod and closed his eyes again. He was asleep again within moments.

"Good Evening, Will," Hannibal called from the poor excuse of a kitchen when he noticed the younger man's eyes blink awake. He was in the middle of heating up an even poorer excuse for chicken soup, which he hoped he could convince Will to eat. Will hadn't had any food for days now and he would need to eat in order to regain his strength.

"How long?" Was the first question Will always asked when he woke, and Hannibal didn't hesitate answering.

“Seven hours. Would you like some soup?” He couldn’t say he was surprised by the grimace of distaste that crossed the younger man’s face, but he was not pleased by it. “I assure you, it is safe, Will. I can show you the can it came from if you like.”

His disgust that he was reduced to heating up canned goods was more than obvious, but there were very few choices at the moment. Preparing a proper soup would require more ingredients than the nearby convenience store could provide, and Hannibal didn’t want to leave Will alone for any longer than necessary. Still the small huff of laughter that escaped Will’s lips and the slight amusement in those pale tired eyes was worth it.

Hannibal smiled as he ladled a small portion of the soup into a plastic bowl and smiled even more when Will ate a few spoonfuls without protest. It wasn’t much and the younger man fell asleep again soon after, that small effort having exhausted him. Still, Hannibal’s heart felt lighter than it had in days.

“How long?”

“Three hours. It’s nearly midnight,” Hannibal answered, and placed a bookmark in the old battered paperback he'd been reading to mark his spot. As he set it down in his lap he turned his attention to Will from his usual place in the plastic chair beside the bed.

Will was quiet for a long time, a pensive look on his face. But finally the young man spoke.

“Are you going to kill me?” The question was barely above a breath, and the sound seemed to catch in Will’s throat like jagged glass. It was followed with a pained cough. Hannibal frowned and rose from his chair without a word. He ignored the way the younger man flinched slightly at his movement, and walked over to the table where a small plastic pail rested. He was glad that he’d gone out to get ice not too long ago and there was still plenty left that had not completely melted.

“Would you like some ice? It should help soothe your throat,” Hannibal offered, glancing back at Will. If Will insisted on having this discussion now then Hannibal wanted him as comfortable as possible.

The younger man hesitated for a moment, seeming surprised by the question, before he finally nodded cautiously. Hannibal smiled and transferred some of the ice cubes to a plastic cup before returning to sit beside Will’s bed. He fished out one of the cold cubes and lifted it to Will’s lips. A slight flush rose to Will’s pale cheeks, thankfully not as a result of fever this time. But despite whatever embarrassment the younger man might feel, he slowly parted his lips. Hannibal slipped the small cube of ice into Will’s mouth, greedily allowing his touch to linger a moment on the other man’s lip. Something Will surely noticed, but did not call him out on, as he sucked on the ice cube, his eyes never leaving Hannibal. He fed Will a few more pieces of ice this way in silence before Will spoke again.

“Hannibal,” the younger man’s voice held a note of exasperation as well as weariness. Hannibal gave a noncommittal hum in response and Will sighed in frustration, “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I did not think it required a response. One does not normally spend days tending to a patient because they wish them dead,” Hannibal replied, “If that was the case, it would have been far easier to simply let you drown in the Atlantic.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Will replied stubbornly, and Hannibal grinned in spite of himself.

“It seems like the knock to your head has not diminished your ability to reason. I’d say that is a good sign. Still a brain CT or MRI might not be a bad idea as a precaution,” Hannibal advised, setting aside the cup of ice for now since Will didn’t seem to want any more. That was probably for the best, too much could upset the younger man’s stomach at this stage.

Will sighed heavily and closed his eyes, appearing exhausted even though he’d only just awoken. Hannibal took pity on the younger man. Though most probably thought him incapable of such an emotion, they would be wrong. There were simply very few people who could evoke such a response within him.

“I cannot know every possible future, Will,” Hannibal’s answer, while intentionally vague, was at least an answer. Will opened his eyes and looked at Hannibal once more, though he blinked slowly several times and seemed to have trouble focusing on him, “I certainly did not anticipate your design for us at the top of that cliff.”

It was a half-truth, as he had in fact anticipated it, mere moments before Will had overbalanced them and plunged them over the edge into a cold watery grave, but he had not fought it even once he’d realized Will’s intention. At Will’s blank look and slow blink, Hannibal frowned.

“Don't you remember?” Hannibal asked with some disappointment. Amnesia was not an uncommon side effect when it came to traumatic brain injury. Even those who’d experienced low grade concussions sometimes suffered memory loss of the time surrounding the event, and Will’s head injury was not minor. When Will shook his head slightly, wincing as he did so at the movement, Hannibal felt a spike of fear grip his heart.

What if Will did not remember any of it? Everything they had finally been able to share, everything that Hannibal had ever wanted… If Will had forgotten everything, he might have to kill the younger man after all. The disappointment might be too much to bear.

“What is the last thing you remember?” Hannibal asked. Will closed his eyes again and was silent for several long moments. Hannibal’s hands curled into fists as his fury began to get the better of him.

“Blood in the moonlight…” Will finally whispered faintly.

Hannibal was obviously more exhausted than he was letting on. How else could Will read the shifting emotions within the elder man whose motives always seemed, even at the best of times, something of a mystery to Will? He could sense the growing fear inside Hannibal. The despair. The anger. The last was almost frightening in its intensity and suddenness. For a moment he thought that Hannibal truly *was* going to kill him then. A part of him almost wanted Hannibal to.

It would have been easier than having to face what he had done. More than that, it would have been easier than having to face what killing with Hannibal had made him feel. No, he did not remember what had happened at the top of the cliff, or what came after, but he could probably guess. It would be easy to let his silence doom him. Let Hannibal kill him now and he would be grateful for it.

Instead he answered Hannibal's question, so faintly he barely heard the admission himself, but Will felt the change instantly. As though Hannibal's rage was a physical weight pressing down on his chest, and then suddenly it was gone, allowing Will to breathe a little easier. He felt the soft touch of fingers in his hair and found himself leaning into it before he could stop himself, instinctively seeking comfort no matter who was offering it. No…because of who was offering it.

"I tried to kill you…" Will whispered, almost more of a question rather than a statement.

"Yes," was Hannibal's soft reply.

"You're not angry?" This time it was definitely a question, but Will didn't expect Hannibal's soft chuckle in response. Will opened his eyes more out of curiosity than anything.

"You asked me that once already the first time you awoke, though I doubt you remember it," Hannibal explained.

"What did you say?"

"No, I'm not angry, Will," Hannibal replied with more sincerity than he thought he'd ever heard in the doctor's voice before. Though Will still found it hard to believe.

"Why? I pushed you off a cliff." The last time Will had tried to kill Hannibal, the man had tried to saw open his head and eat his brain. Will trembled slightly at the memory and his head throbbed, he wasn't sure if the pain was real or just a memory.

To his credit, Hannibal did not reply right away. Instead he seemed to give the question serious thought before answering.

"Because you came with me," Hannibal's answer stunned Will a little, though it probably shouldn't have.

Even though he did not remember the event itself, Will knew himself well enough to know why he would have done it. He remembered how it had felt, gutting Francis Dolarhyde. The feel of the dragon's blood on his hands. The elation. The power. Killing with Hannibal had felt…good. Better than anything he'd ever experienced in his life. It was something he'd tried to deny for so long… And now that he'd finally experienced it, he knew he'd want it again.

For the sake of everyone Will cared for; Molly and Walter. His friends; Jack, Alana… Hannibal had to die. But not only Hannibal, also the monster inside of Will that had finally been unchained. He'd always seen glimpses of it, a specter caught from the corner of his eye that he refused to acknowledge. He could pretend it didn't exist as long as he refused to look too deeply into the dark. Hannibal had drawn it out of him, bit by bit, into the light. Now that

it was free, Will wasn't sure if it could ever be chained again. Especially when...he didn't want to. But even as he told himself that, he knew the real reason he'd tried to kill himself along with Hannibal was for far less altruistic reasons. Because living without Hannibal was simply too painful to consider.

It wasn't the first time that Will had tried to kill Hannibal. It might not even be the last, as Hannibal already pointed out. But this time…it had been different. Will hadn't done it in anger, or to seek revenge. Will hadn't been trying to escape or deny him. He'd accepted him. Them. He hadn't tried to leave… This time he'd gone with Hannibal of his own free will.

Even if that meant death.

But they hadn't died. Hannibal had lived. Of course he had. Then Hannibal had saved him. Will didn't know whether to be thankful or resentful.

"I feel like shit," Will stated with a sigh.

"That is understandable, given your condition. You should rest," Hannibal had told him that often, but Will was tired of rest. Instead he opened his eyes again and looked at Hannibal directly.

"You look like shit," at his observation, the doctor laughed under his breath.

"Eloquent as always, William," the man replied, but he didn't deny it. Will frowned again.

"You've never called me that before," he said cautiously, thinking back on every time Hannibal had ever addressed him. But he couldn't remember the older man ever using his full name until a few days ago.

"No? It suits you," Hannibal's answer wasn't much of one, but he supposed he had a point. He didn't feel much like 'Will' right now. After the silence stretched uncomfortably for a few moments, Hannibal finally looked away and picked up his book once more, "Shall I read to you?"

Will gave a small shrug and winced at the painful pull in his shoulder he'd almost forgotten about. The pain was soon forgotten as Hannibal began to read aloud, not in English. Italian, Will thought. He didn't understand a word of it, but it was soothing nonetheless. Will found his eyelids growing heavy as exhaustion pulled at him in spite of his best efforts. Though one thought kept circling around and around in his head even as he fell asleep.

If he was no longer Will Graham, then who was he?

Chapter 8

Hannibal had just turned off the water for the shower when he heard the first scream. It surprised him into stillness for a moment, but in the next heartbeat he was grabbing a towel, barely wasting enough time to tie it around his waist for the sake of modesty before rushing back to the main room. On the threshold he froze again, dripping water onto the stained carpet as he took in the sight before him. Not in shock or fear, but intrigue.

Will was still asleep in the bed, but his slumber was far from restful. His movements were violent enough that most of the sheets had fallen to the floor, or had become twisted around the younger man, seeming to only add to Will's agitation. Already the young man had pulled out the IV in his arm and blood smeared his clothes and the stiff overly bleached sheets. Will was drenched in sweat, shaking like he was in the middle of a seizure, his head tossing from side to side. The sounds escaping the younger man's throat were like those of a wounded animal.

It was fascinating.

Of course Hannibal knew that Will was prone to nightmares and night sweats, even after he'd been cured of his encephalitis. But even during those days when Will's mind had been aflame with sickness, Hannibal had not seen an episode this violent. Will had not spoken of any such episodes either, though he supposed Will could have been hiding them. Or he simply had not known. Could such night terrors have been a prelude to the younger man's sleep walking in the past? Or was this something new? What images were plaguing the younger man's dreams that could cause such distress?

Hannibal was pulled out of his musings when Will suddenly let out another cry loud enough to wake the dead...or anyone who might be sharing the room next to theirs. Hannibal already had proof how thin the walls were between the rooms, as he'd been forced to listen to the occupants next door having sex on more than one occasion. It had taken all of his patience not to simply go next door and slit their throats in the middle of the act just to get some peace and quiet.

Will's screams were far from the cries of ecstasy that Hannibal had overheard, however, and it would be very inconvenient if someone were to contact the motel manager with complaints. Or worse, call the police. It would also be inconvenient should Will actually cause himself harm during this episode, after Hannibal had put so much effort in nursing the younger man back to health.

So Hannibal crossed the room quickly and perched on the side of the bed closest to Will.

"Will, it's all right. Wake up. You're safe..." He tried to reach the younger man with words first, but when that didn't work, Hannibal reached out to touch the other man, intending to gently shake Will awake. Will's response to his touch was another near blood curdling scream and nearly throwing himself out of the other side of the bed trying to escape it. Hannibal reacted instinctively, lunging for him and grabbing Will before he could fall. This

of course only caused Will to thrash harder and shout louder. Frustrated, Hannibal dragged him back to the center of the bed. He felt his towel slip and fall away while he fought with Will but he paid it no mind for the moment. He pulled Will securely against his chest and used his legs to restrain the younger man's. One arm went around Will's chest to secure his flailing arms. His other hand went over Will's mouth to muffle his cries. This earned him a prompt bite that made Hannibal wince, but he didn't pull his hand away.

"Will... William... Listen to me. Listen to my voice. You're safe," Hannibal whispered reassuringly against the shell of Will's ear. Will whimpered and made choking sounds against his hand. Will's fingernails dug deep bloody tracks into his forearms but Hannibal did not let go, and kept his voice soft and calm, "Your name is Will Graham. You're in a motel room. It's seven thirty-nine in the morning. You're safe."

He repeated those words over and over, hoping they would reach the younger man and help ground him as they had once so long ago. Will's breaths came out fast and shallow, near hyperventilating, and his heart raced beneath Hannibal's palm pressed against his chest. Will made a high keening noise against the hand covering his mouth but his struggles gradually lessened. Will was still shaking nearly uncontrollably, but he was no longer fighting to get away from Hannibal. Will's scratching fingers had become clinging instead. The frightened wails now muffled sobs.

"Will? Can you hear me?" Hannibal asked, and received a faint nod from the other man who had been unresponsive up to this point, "I'm going to take my hand away now. I need you to be quiet."

Another nod, even shakier than the last, and Hannibal did as promised, easing his bloody hand away from Will's mouth. Will drew in a sharp gasp once his mouth was freed and began to cough. Hannibal winced at the sound and eased his grip around the younger man so he could reach over the side of the bed and grab the oxygen mask. He started to place it over Will's face only to have it batted away.

"No..." Will's protest was weak and Hannibal frowned at it, especially when Will continued to cough as he tried to catch his breath unsuccessfully. Hannibal set the mask aside for the moment.

"All right. But you need to calm your breathing, Will. If you can do that, you don't have to wear it. Slowly now. Breathe with me. In, and out," Hannibal ordered gently, pulling Will back against his chest once more so that the younger man could feel the rise and fall of it, and mimic it. Will's dislike of the mask was motive enough to obey Hannibal's commands, and gradually his breathing slowed and became more even. Once Will's breathing had steadied to Hannibal's satisfaction, he let go and eased Will back down on the bed. He checked Will's pulse while the younger man blinked blearily up at him.

"What...happened...?" Will croaked.

"I believe you just experienced a panic attack, possibly triggered by a night terror," Hannibal explained, gazing down at Will with a concerned expression. "Have you ever experienced one before?"

"I... No... I don't know..." Will's expression was a beautiful mixture of fear and confusion as he gazed up at Hannibal. Normally the younger man would never appear so vulnerable, unguarded, before Hannibal. It would be akin to bearing his throat to a predator. But Will was obviously shaken by his recent experiences, more than he would probably ever admit in the light of day. It was an excellent opportunity to encourage Will's dependence on him once more as a stabilizing influence, much like he had in the beginning.

"You have a history of sleep walking, so I would not be surprised if you'd also suffered night terrors during such episodes, as they are often paired together. Head injuries and stress can also be a trigger. Do you remember what you were dreaming about?"

Hannibal was surprised when Will suddenly gave a strained laugh.

"I don't think the FBI is going to cover my therapy bills with you anymore, Dr. Lecter," Will explained, and Hannibal grinned.

"I doubt they would have before, if I had not given Jack a considerable discount for my services," He did not add that he'd also extended that discount to Will himself when the younger man had come back to him for 'therapy' after his incarceration. There was no reason to reopen those wounds right now, when they had still not completely healed even after all this time. Perhaps they never would. Will's silence and serious expression suggested the younger man was thinking the same thing.

For now, he let the matter go. If it happened again, perhaps they would need to discuss it, whether Will wanted to or not.

"Let's get you settled then," Hannibal offered instead, and helped untangle the sheets from around Will, noting that they would need to be replaced, saturated with sweat and blood as they were. He stood and retrieved his towel which he tied once more around his waist. A soft surprised sound from Will when he bent to retrieve the soiled sheets had him turning back to the younger man to find him blushing bright scarlet. Hannibal chuckled, "I'm afraid you caught me at an awkward moment, Will."

"Sorry..." Will offered, still blushing.

"It's fine," Hannibal reassured with a small shake of his head, "I will be right back."

He took the sheets into the bathroom and shoved them into the small trash can to be disposed of later. He found a fresh pair of linens with the towels and returned to the main room. The younger man was staring at his bloody fingers with a frown and then looked to Hannibal as he started arranging the covers around him. A light touch against the raw scratches on his arm made him pause. Will was looking at him with something akin to horror.

"I did that?" he asked cautiously, like he didn't want to believe it.

"Yes, and this," Hannibal replied, lifting his bitten hand to show Will. It would probably scar despite the fact that the teeth marks had already stopped bleeding. Hannibal tried not to appear delighted by this. Especially when Will looked so guilty. Even though he was secretly delighted by that as well.

"I bit you?!" Will asked, horrified, and Hannibal gave an unconcerned shrug.

"It was my own fault entirely for restraining you the way I did, but necessary," Hannibal explained as he finished tucking the covers around Will. He returned to the bathroom for a wet cloth which he then used to clean some of the sweat and blood off of the younger man. Will could certainly use a bath after all of this. Perhaps he would suggest one later on. Though he wasn't sure if Will would agree, given the uncomfortable looks he was given and bright red flush that was still staining the younger man's pale cheeks. Especially when he wiped the blood away from Will's mouth. Hannibal tried not to smile too much at his discomfort.

"I'm sorry," Will apologized again when he was finished.

"It is quite all right, Will. It was beyond your control," Hannibal reassured, though a part of him wanted to ask Will if he'd enjoyed it. The taste of his blood. He wondered if that had more to do with the younger man's discomfort than the fact that Will had bitten him in the first place.

Will was tired but he didn't want to sleep. Part of that was because it felt like all he had been doing lately was sleeping and he was sick and tired of it. The bigger reason, which he didn't even want to admit to himself, was because he was afraid to sleep. He was afraid of what he might dream.

Hannibal was taking Will's night terror and panic attack in stride, acting as though he should not be embarrassed or concerned by it. That in itself worried Will a little bit. It felt too much like before. When Will still had encephalitis and Hannibal had calmly stood by and watched as he'd slowly lost his mind. Will still wasn't quite sure why Hannibal had done that. Had it merely amused him? Was he curious? Was it so he could more easily frame Will for the copycat murders? It was probably a mixture of all three. Or maybe he'd never be able to fully understand Hannibal's motives, even with his empathy.

Their...relationship...convoluted though it was, had progressed since that time. All the effort Hannibal had taken to convincingly frame Will for murder, and in the end it had been Hannibal who'd set him free again. All because Hannibal had missed him? Realized he'd wanted something different or more from Will? A friend? A companion? Someone to know him. Truly know him. Truly see him. Someone to share with, things he could not share with anyone else.

Hannibal had seen the potential for that in Will. Had deliberately drawn out the part of Will that he'd tried to keep hidden all of his life. The reason why Will could so easily empathize with killers. With monsters. He and Hannibal weren't so different. Hannibal had changed him, and he had changed Hannibal. Will saw that now, more clearly than he'd ever seen it before.

Things were different now, he told himself, but still the reminder left him with an uneasy feeling. He didn't like remembering how unstable he'd been then. Didn't like how closely it mirrored how he felt now. Adrift. Confused. Afraid. His feelings were a jumbled mess inside of him.

Will felt guilty about the part he'd played in using Hannibal as bait for Francis Dolarhyde. He felt guilty for letting Jack talk him into giving the devil his due. He felt guilty that his actions had led to more deaths of innocents caught in the middle. But it was the guilt he felt over nearly getting Hannibal killed that truly ate at Will's conscience. He was grateful that Hannibal had survived. So grateful that it scared him. Because he knew he shouldn't be grateful. He should be afraid. Afraid of what Hannibal might do next. More people were going to die. That was almost certain. Some maybe Will even cared about, and their deaths would be on Will's hands. Perhaps literally.

Because Will couldn't deny that he had liked killing with Hannibal. The feeling of blood on his hands. The taste of it in his mouth. It was a feeling he would never forget. In fact, he craved it. He'd had it again, briefly, when Hannibal had woken him from the dream. The blood on his hands had been Hannibal's. So was the blood in his mouth from when he'd bitten the older man's hand. It should have horrified him. Instead he found himself continuously licking his lips like he was trying to find traces of that taste again. The memory of it made him forget his fears and uncertainties. Reminding him how he'd felt when he had killed the Red Dragon. Powerful. The way Hannibal had looked at him afterwards. Beautiful.

He wanted that again. He hated himself that he wanted it. It was conflicting, and that conflict was playing out in his dreams in horrifying detail.

"Can't live with him. Can't live without him," Will muttered under his breath. How true that was.

"Did you say something, Will?" Hannibal's voice carried from the other side of the room where Hannibal was busy getting dressed. Will turned his attention away from the television playing some boring game show that he wasn't really watching anyway towards Hannibal, and he couldn't help the surprised laugh that escaped him when he got a good look at the older man, "Is something amusing?"

"You could say that," Will replied, grinning in spite of himself. At least Hannibal didn't appear offended, "You look like a trucker. Or a lumberjack."

It was true too. He'd never seen Hannibal so...scruffy before. The older man was sporting almost a full beard as he hadn't shaved in several days, wearing a pair of jeans that actually had holes in the knees, and a plaid flannel shirt to boot. If he hadn't just watched Hannibal get dressed, he'd never have recognized the older man. That was probably the point.

The illusion was further enhanced when Hannibal suddenly pulled on a beat up-looking baseball cap. Will could only stare, frankly astonished.

"I will attempt to take that as a compliment and that you approve of my disguise," Hannibal replied. The grin slipped from Will's face when he realized the reason Hannibal would need a disguise right now.

"You're leaving?" Will asked, hating how nervous he sounded without even meaning to. He wasn't sure if he was more afraid of the possibility of Hannibal being recognized despite his 'disguise', that Hannibal might not come back, or being left alone with only his doubts and

fears to keep him company, which would surely only grow without the other man there to keep them at bay. Hannibal smiled and came over to the bed. He sat down on the edge of it and took Will's hand in a manner that was probably supposed to be comforting.

"Only for a short while. We need more supplies. I will not be gone long," Hannibal reassured, his voice almost gentle. But then suddenly something hardened in Hannibal's eyes and the grip on Will's hand turned almost painful making the younger man wince, "If you try to leave, I will find your wife, and feed her own son to her as you watch. Do you understand?"

Will felt the blood drain from his face and his heart began to pound so hard he was sure Hannibal would be able to hear it. Will gave a shaky nod and the hand on his gentled once more. Hannibal's fingers brushed almost gently over the wedding ring Will still wore as the older man stood and released his hand. Will watched Hannibal leave with wide eyes, his heart still beating hard and fast long after the other man had gone.

He looked down at his hand and the simple gold band on his finger. Then Will's eyes fell on the old fashioned rotary phone sitting on the nightstand next to the bed. Curious, he reached over to pick up the receiver and held it to his ear. Unsurprisingly he heard no dial tone. He wondered if Hannibal had merely unplugged the phone, or cut the line. Did it really matter? Who would he have called?

After hanging up the receiver, Will worked the ring off of his finger and set it to rest on the table beside the phone.

Chapter 9

The walk to the convenience store from the motel was all of three blocks. The sun was shining, and the early afternoon air was brisk but not too cold. It would take twenty minutes, thirty at most, to get to the store, pick from their meager selection, and return to the motel room. It certainly wasn't the first time he'd made the trip, and probably would not be the last, but every time Hannibal had left Will alone he'd felt uneasy. At first he thought it was merely unwillingness to leave the younger man without care should something happen, if his health should take a sudden turn for the worse for whatever reason. But now that Will was conscious, well on his way to recovery, and the chance of him suddenly developing complications that would endanger his life were lessened, Hannibal found that uneasy feeling had not diminished in the least. In fact, it was worse, and he suspected he knew the reason why.

Will was healing. He still could not rise from the bed easily without aid, and needed Hannibal's help for many things still, but that would not be the case for long. Soon Will would no longer be so reliant on him and when Will no longer needed Hannibal to care for him, what would he do? What would *they* do? He wanted Will to choose to stay with him. As friends. Partners. Perhaps even more? But he did not know what Will wanted, and that uncertainty ate at him. A part of him almost wished Will's recovery could be slower so that he could have more time. Their relationship was at a very delicate and critical stage. One slip could cause everything to shatter and the pieces might never come together again.

Hannibal did not like that lack of confidence.

Will had denied him once already. Fooled him. Made him believe he was getting everything he wanted, only to find out it was a lie. Will had broken his heart. In response, Hannibal had hurt Will. He'd taken away the gift he'd planned on giving him. Killing Abigail… If there was one thing that Hannibal could say he regretted, it was that. Will had betrayed him but he'd been willing to give Will the chance to repent, to give up the scheme, and to run away with him without spilling a drop of blood. It was more generous than Hannibal had ever been with anyone. But Will had continued to lie, and all Hannibal had wanted was to hurt Will as badly as Will had hurt him. He'd succeeded, but he'd also hurt himself just as much. His only consolation was that at least he'd had enough composure not to kill Will as well as Abigail. He'd wanted to, but he'd stopped himself at the last moment from delivering a truly lethal blow. He'd given Will a chance. To live. To find him. Even if neither of them had been able to forgive the other.

The second time Will denied him, it had been under much different circumstances, and he was just spiteful enough to deny the younger man what he wanted most. He would not let Will forget him, ever, even if that meant giving up the one thing Hannibal had always valued most. His freedom. He'd waited three years for Will to come back to him. How much longer would he have waited if fate and circumstance had not intervened? His patience was near an end and he would not let the younger man go so easily now.

Hannibal reminded himself that Will *had* finally joined him, at the top of that cliff, of his own free will. But that was only when Will had been certain they would both die. He was less certain what Will's choice would be now that they had both survived. The sight of that wedding band on Will's finger was a harsh reminder that Will had attempted to make for himself the family that Hannibal had once tried to give him. That Will had *genuinely* tried to forget him.

He'd wanted to rip that ring off of Will's finger so many times. Maybe even bite the finger off entirely as a punishment. But he'd restrained himself. He'd hoped that Will would remove it himself in time. But the longer it stayed, the more Hannibal's resentment had grown, and he had ended up doing something impatient. He'd voiced a threat, and a promise, that Will would ill appreciate, and risked the fragile solidarity between them. Their alliance was not certain enough yet to risk such strain, and Hannibal might have done irreparable damage with one careless comment.

Hannibal sighed as he pushed open the door to the convenience store, the small bell above announcing his entrance as always. The girl at the counter looked up and gave him a warm smile and greeting which Hannibal returned as he grabbed a small basket for his needs. The selection was abysmally poor, mostly quick boxed meals, canned goods, and junk food. But Hannibal still held out hope he could find something of value in the rotating stock. Perhaps an offering better than canned soup might help smooth some of Will's undoubtedly ruffled feathers when Hannibal returned.

A small selection of 'locally grown' farmers produce that had been recently delivered looked promising. Perhaps he could make a casserole (as much as the idea pained him) or lasagna with some of the dried noodles in another aisle. It was a shame the small store's selection of meats consisted only of the prepackaged sandwich variety that Hannibal refused to even look at. He supposed he could try making something vegetarian; it wouldn't be the first time he'd made such concessions, and Will might appreciate the effort and sacrifice Hannibal was making on his behalf. Though Hannibal hoped it would only be a temporary sacrifice.

As Hannibal picked through the vegetables searching for the best quality he could find, a movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention. It was another shopper, but this was the second time that Hannibal had noticed the man looking his way since he'd entered the store. Hannibal frowned to himself but he continued shopping as though nothing were out of the ordinary. He'd known the risk of being noticed would be greater the longer they remained in one place, but Hannibal had been reluctant to move Will until his condition was more stable. It could have been worse. If his theory was correct and they'd not taken him already, then they probably did not want witnesses. Not police then. Interesting, and potentially beneficial.

In the aisle with the pasta he noticed another man, though he watched Hannibal with a little more discretion than the first. Two then inside. More perhaps outside. Had they followed him here all the way from the motel? Did they know where Will was? He decided to take care of these two while he still had something of an advantage. Hannibal walked up to the counter with his goods and smiled charmingly at the young lady behind it.

"Pardon me, but do you have a public restroom?" he asked politely. Hannibal had been to the little store enough that he was not a completely new face and always left a generous tip for the girl as she'd always been very courteous to him. He hoped to use that incentive to his advantage now.

"No sir, but you can use the staff's restroom if you need. It's in the back, down the hall and to the left. Shall I bag these for you while you're gone?" she offered without missing a beat, and Hannibal gave her a brilliant smile.

"Please. Thank you very much, young lady," he replied, pushing the expected ten dollar bill her way before heading to the back of the store. He was still being watched. They were probably confused by this turn of events and trying to discern whether or not their surveillance had been noticed. They could fall back now, and risk losing him, or they could pursue him.

He only had to wait five minutes, hiding behind a tall stack of store merchandise, before he heard the rushing footsteps down the hall into the storeroom. Hannibal smiled as he silently flicked open the blade of the knife in his hand.

Will was still in bed. The television was still on, but he wasn't even pretending to watch it anymore. He was too busy fuming.

How dare he! That bastard! That fucking bastard!

That mantra had been repeating over and over in Will's head pretty much since Hannibal had left the room. After Will's horrified shock had worn off, that was. Anger had quickly followed. It was probably a good thing that Hannibal was not there when that had happened because Will had been angry enough that he might have tried to gouge out the older man's eyes with his bare hands. He might have felt bad about it later, *might*, but it was probably still a good thing that Will had the chance to cool off a little since then. He was still royally pissed off at Hannibal, but not enough to attempt any permanent damage. At least, not crippling damage. He was still considering giving the doctor a nasty scar, which might go badly for Will because even though Hannibal was still recovering from his own injuries he was still far better off than Will was right now.

Oh, he wasn't surprised by Hannibal's words. Not in the slightest. The bastard had already tried to kill his wife and stepson by putting them in Francis Dolarhyde's sights, after all. Their only 'crime' being that Will cared for them. At first he'd thought it was just a way for Hannibal to hurt him. Like he'd hurt him with Abigail. To punish him. But the moment Will stood before him, confronting him, and Hannibal's all too casual, 'How's the wife?', he'd known it was something else.

Hannibal had been jealous! Maybe he still was? Will flexed his left hand that still ached a little and glanced at the ring sitting on the nightstand next to him. He felt guilt welling up inside him just looking at it, and he almost stubbornly reached for it to put it back on so Hannibal would see him wearing it when he got back. If only to prove a point that Hannibal couldn't threaten him. That Will wasn't afraid of him. But the small seed of rebellion withered quickly. Because he *was* afraid, and he would never risk Molly or Walter that way over a

stupid pissing contest with Hannibal. Hannibal was far too good at calling his bluffs and making good on his threats. It wasn't worth it, but it still made Will angry.

Did Hannibal even have a reason to be jealous? Will sure as hell hadn't been considering 'leaving' as Hannibal had put it. At least, not until Hannibal had mentioned it. He hadn't been thinking about returning to his family. He hadn't been thinking of 'escaping' and going back to Jack, like he probably should have been. He hadn't thought much about anything happening outside this damned motel room, to be honest. He hadn't really had the time or opportunity when it was hard enough just staying awake and concentrating for a few minutes at a time. He hadn't given a single thought about the wedding ring. Or what it might mean to Hannibal.

He was still trying to sort out the contradictory feelings for the man who'd both saved and damned him. He hated Hannibal more than he'd ever hated anyone in his life. He also cared about him more than he'd ever cared about anyone. Those conflicting feelings tore him apart every second he was in the other man's presence. Sometimes it was painful just to look at him. But now that Hannibal was gone, all Will wanted was for the man to return. Even though Will felt he might punch him when he did.

Hell, he'd been more worried about Hannibal leaving *him*, abandoning *him* in one way or another, if the tone of his nightmares were any indication. No matter how angry he was at Hannibal right now the thought of never seeing him again, either Hannibal being killed, imprisoned, or the older man losing interest in him one day, made Will *ache*. It was not rational and it sure as hell wasn't healthy, but he couldn't help it.

He *should* be worried about his wife and stepson, but he'd barely given them any thought. All he knew was he had no intention of returning to them. Hannibal's threat aside, Will knew it could never be as it once was. He'd warned Molly that if he came back he would be different. But even Will had underestimated just how much he would be changed. In that respect, Hannibal and The Great Red Dragon had done their job well. He never wanted Molly or Walter to ever see him like this.

Hannibal's threat made him worry even more now. What would he do if Hannibal ever made him choose? It was all too possible a scenario. What if one day it came down to killing Hannibal or Molly? Hannibal or Jack? Hannibal or Alana? If they were all forcing him to pull the trigger, which one would die? Will didn't want to make such a choice, but one day he may have to. No matter who he chose, a part of him would die forever. He was ashamed to admit it, even to himself, but it was true. It was far easier to 'kill' Hannibal when he knew he would not have to live with that choice.

Maybe it would have been better for everyone concerned if he'd died in the ocean. What if he died now? Before Hannibal returned? It probably wouldn't be too difficult, he was still so weak, it wouldn't take much. He could break a mirror. Cut his wrists, or better, jab the piece of glass in his throat. That would be kind of poetic wouldn't it, if he cut his own throat? Killed himself the way Hannibal had killed Abigail? Will couldn't hurt anyone anymore after that, and Hannibal…

Would Hannibal consider that 'leaving' and take his rage out on Molly and Walter?

Will laughed bitterly and then made a frustrated growl as he hit the mattress beneath him with his fist. It wasn't nearly satisfying enough. Goddamn him. He hated Hannibal for making him feel this way. Even at his worst, he'd never contemplated suicide before. Even when he was going crazy, his brain almost literally on fire (again, because of Hannibal), he had not considered suicide as a way out. Now he'd not only thrown himself off a cliff once, he was considering doing it again.

He wasn't sure if he was more angry at Hannibal because of his threat, or because now even suicide was no longer an option of escape for Will. Had Hannibal been thinking of that when he'd made his threat? Will's chances of actually getting up and walking out the door in his current condition were pretty slim. Had Hannibal seen something in him that Will hadn't even noticed himself?

Damn him...

A sudden knock on the door pulled Will out of his morbid contemplation and he froze. It wasn't Hannibal. Why would he need to knock? He'd taken the room key with him. The knock was repeated, rather impatiently, and there came a voice on the other side that said, "Housekeeping."

Will frowned. He knew Hannibal had hung the 'Do not Disturb' sign on the door and no one had ever come to the room, at least when Will had been awake. Which hadn't been for long, but still...

He started to push himself up in the bed on shaking arms when the door was suddenly kicked open.

Chapter 10

Will froze like a deer caught in the headlights of a car as three men he did not recognize forced their way into the motel room.

“Will Graham?” the one in the front asked, practically demanded, and that was enough to break Will from his paralysis. He all but dove out of the bed, his shoulder screaming, and his legs collapsing weakly underneath him, unable to support his weight. But his desperate lunge was enough to reach the stainless steel tray of medical equipment Hannibal had set up for when he needed to change Will’s dressings. The tray and its contents spilled messily over the stained carpet, scattering as he fell, but he still managed to get his hands on the pair of sharp scissors he’d been aiming for, the only ‘weapon’ within view.

“Woah! Wait! Hold on!” one of the men shouted, but Will didn’t listen. Thusly armed, but hiding it the best he could, Will backed away from the men as quickly as he was able, all but crawling on the floor in nothing but a thin pair of cotton pajama bottoms. His eyes darted towards the open bathroom door. If he could get there and lock the door, maybe he could buy himself some time.

Obviously guessing his intent, one of the men quickly placed himself between Will and his only route of escape. Another man remained guarding the door leading outside. The last slowly approached Will with his hands raised, as though to appear non-threatening. With nowhere else to go, Will backed himself into a corner, so at least he could keep his eyes on all three.

“Hey, easy there. We’re not here to hurt you. You’re Will Graham, right? We’re with the FBI, look.” The man slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out a badge, showing it to Will. Will frowned as his intense gaze swept over the men. They were wearing bullet proof vests over their black clothing. The letters FBI painted large and yellow over the front. Along with the badge, they certainly looked convincing.

“Where is he?” The man went on, taking a step closer to Will. “Hannibal Lecter. Where did he go?”

Hannibal. They were looking for Hannibal. That meant they hadn’t caught him…yet. Will's gaze finally settled at the weapon holstered at the man’s hip. It definitely wasn’t standard issue for federal agents. Suspicions confirmed, Will couldn’t help but laugh under his breath. Confusion and frustration passed over the man’s face, replacing the fake concern.

“You’re good, I’ll give you that,” Will said, still chuckling softly, though he couldn’t help but wonder who these men were if they weren’t FBI. Did it even matter? Because whoever they were, this wasn’t going to go well for him.

“We’re trying to help you, Mr. Graham. Just tell us where he is, and we can take you home,” the man went on and Will practically snarled in answer.

“Drop the act. He’s not here, and you won’t find him,” Will shot back, his tone implying that he did know, he just wasn't going to divulge that information. It was a gamble. The truth was he had no idea where Hannibal had gone. Not exactly, though he was probably still nearby. But if the men thought he knew where Hannibal was, then maybe they had a reason to keep him alive for a little while longer.

“Listen you little shit….” the man near the bathroom growled, obviously having lost patience in the whole affair, and stepped towards Will. Will saw an opening and took it, jamming the surgical scissors in the inside of the man’s thigh and twisting them hard. The man went down with a cry of pain and Will moved, knowing he would only have seconds. He tried once again to reach the door to the bathroom and its relative safety. Maybe he could hold out there until Hannibal returned or try to climb out the window.

He didn’t make it. Too weak. Too slow. A rough fist caught in his hair and jerked him back, wrenching his neck, and then a second later he collided painfully with the wall against which he was thrown. He collapsed to the floor, his ears ringing and his head pounding.

“You son of a bitch!” He heard the shout right before a boot connected to his bare stomach driving the air out of his lungs. Will curled fetal, trying to protect himself. He was kicked again, in his side this time, and he couldn’t stop the cry of pain that left him.

“Stop! Enough!” Will hadn’t expected to hear that, or for the man beating him to obey, but no more blows followed.

“The bastard stuck me!” the man Will had stabbed protested.

“They want him alive, you prick! You want to get paid or not?” the first man went on, confirming Will’s suspicions. Definitely not FBI. Bounty hunters maybe? But who had hired them? There were plenty of people who might want Hannibal, alive or dead. Fewer who might want Will alive. “Tie him up. If nothing else, Lecter will come after him.”

Will looked up just in time for the butt of a gun to smash him in the side of his face, knocking him out cold.

Will awoke sometime later. He wasn’t sure how long. He just knew he hurt. A lot. One of his eyes was swollen shut and there was dried blood on his face. His cheek, the one that Dolarhyde had stabbed, hurt something awful, and the bandage on it was saturated with blood. Some of the stitches must have torn when he’d been hit. Hannibal wouldn’t be pleased about that. His head hurt even worse than his face. It hadn’t hurt this bad since Hannibal had tried to saw open his skull. The light hurt his eyes and his stomach turned dangerously. He wanted to vomit and he only held back because he had a feeling that would just make him hurt even more. He couldn’t stop a small groan of discomfort from escaping his lips. Unfortunately this seemed to alert his captors to his consciousness.

“He’s awake,” Will heard from somewhere next to him. Then suddenly his hair was gripped hard and his head was yanked back. “I don’t know what Lecter sees in him; he’s not that pretty.”

A rough hand trailed down the side of his mangled face as though to make a point. Will growled and snapped at those fingers with his teeth but he was too slow. He was backhanded hard for his trouble.

“Feisty though. Maybe there are some perks,” the man laughed, and a hand started to move down his bare chest. Will tried to squirm away from the touch and realized that his arms were bound behind him and his ankles were tied together with zip ties. The hand got as far as his waist, hovering just above the loose pajamas he was at least still wearing, for the moment, before another man spoke up.

“Keep your hands off him, Cole. How many times I gotta say it?” the other man ordered and to his relief the hand on him was removed.

“Why? It’s not like anyone will know. We can just say Lecter did it,” the first man protested.

“Are you an idiot? You don’t think he’ll talk?”

“We can cut out his tongue, can say Lecter did that too, after we’re done using it of course.”

Will’s stomach clenched and his nausea grew even worse, if that was possible. To his surprise, the second man laughed.

“You’re going to put your dick in that cannibal-bitch’s mouth? Good luck to you,” Will didn’t much like being called Hannibal’s ‘bitch’ and the implication was even more nausea-inducing, but at least the first man seemed a little more reluctant than before. Thankfully both men were silenced when the third man spoke up.

“Shut up, both of you.”

“Dale, this is pointless. It’s been hours. He’s not coming back.” Will started in surprise at that and lifted his head trying to focus on his surroundings with his good eye. He was still in the motel room. One man sat on the end of the bed watching the television that Will had left on. Another knelt close to him but he wasn’t looking at Will, he was looking at the third man standing near the window with a phone in his hand.

Even with the thick drapes shut Will could tell that it was dark outside. Hannibal had left before noon. Will must have been unconscious for hours…and Hannibal hadn’t come back. He didn’t know how to feel about that. If these bastards were still waiting around for Hannibal, at least they hadn’t caught him, but if Hannibal hadn’t come back, he must have realized something was wrong and…he hadn’t come back for Will.

It would have been stupid for him to. There were three of them. They had guns. He didn't even know if Hannibal was armed. They were waiting for him. Best case, they would have captured him as easily as they'd captured Will. Worst case, they would have killed him. He couldn't blame Hannibal for not coming for him. Shouldn't...

The man near the window hung up the phone.

"No one is answering. Let’s get back to the hideout. We'll figure out what to do then," the man said then nodded to Will. "Bring him along."

The man kneeling beside Will grabbed him by the arm then and hoisted him to his feet. Will's knees immediately started to give before he was even 'standing', but he still struggled as much as he was able. The man pulled on his bound arms hard, making Will groan in discomfort and a gun was pressed under his chin.

"Don't press your luck, boy," Cole growled, and the man on the bed who had yet to be identified got up and cut the ties around his legs at least. Not that he could walk; the two men had to practically drag Will between them after shoving a wad of cloth into his mouth to keep him quiet.

He was unceremoniously tossed into the back of a dark SUV and there was nothing he could do to stop them. While they drove, Will managed to spit out the cloth and tried to work off the zip tie around his wrists. Unfortunately he wasn't having much luck. His wrists began bleeding from where the tie cut into his skin but that didn't stop him. The blood might make things a little easier, he reasoned.

The tie slipped free just as they came to a stop at their apparent destination. It was only a small relief as he knew he was still severely disadvantaged, outnumbered, weak, and had no weapons to speak of. He'd have to bide his time. Maybe he'd get an opening. He had to be ready for when that happened.

So when the back of the SUV opened, Will struggled but he kept his arms behind him, even when they punched him in the gut and he doubled over in pain. They yanked him back upright and thankfully didn't check the tie on his wrists as they pulled him along to a darkened building. It looked like some kind of old store front, but the windows were boarded up and the 'for sale' sign hanging outside looked like it had been there for some time. The weeds leading up the walkway to the front were nearly up to Will's knees.

No one was going to come looking for him here anytime soon.

They manhandled him around to the rear entrance and inside. The smell hit him like a slap to the face.

Blood. A lot of it.

"What the fuck?!" one of the men shouted and Will's eyes widened at the sight before them. There were three bodies lying in huge pools of blood that covered nearly the whole floor. There were knife wounds to the chest, arms, legs, genitals, faces. They were barely recognizable as human. Will felt a smile pull at his lips in spite of himself and then pain exploded in his face as he was backhanded hard. He hit the ground with a pained groan. He heard the hammer of a gun click into place.

"He did this, didn't he?! Didn't he?!" Cole shouted at him, holding his gun in Will's face. Will slowly looked up at the man and spat out a mouthful of blood. His teeth were red as he grinned up at his would be kidnapper.

"You're next," Will hissed, and unsurprisingly that earned him another painful kick. Will didn't groan this time, he laughed.

"Shut up you crazy fuck!" but Will didn't stop, Dale stopped Cole from kicking him again. He was definitely the most composed out of any of the men. Especially not the third, who was retching somewhere behind Will. But Will could tell he was just as shaken as the other two. They were no longer the predators. They were the prey.

"Enough! Stay with him but don't touch him. Eddie! Pull yourself together and come with me. We're going to sweep this place," Dale ordered, and his two subordinates composed themselves. Dale and Eddie then moved further into the abandoned building while Cole remained standing over Will, still holding his gun in his face.

"I don't care what our orders were. You're dead when this is all over. I'm going to make you scream before it's done. Hell, you might even like it, you sadistic fuck," Cole hissed, and Will only laughed harder, not really caring how much it hurt his face to do so.

"Shut up, you psycho!" Cole shouted.

Will looked up at him through the blood dripping into his eyes. He laughed as he watched one of the bodies behind Cole move, sit up, and pull the bloody remains of another man's face off of his own. Will continued to laugh as Hannibal rose to his feet, silent as death, and slit Cole's throat from behind before the man even knew he was there. He laughed as the man fell to his knees, grasping at his own throat in vain, gurgling, his blood splattering across Will as he fell.

Hannibal smiled down at him.

Will finally stopped laughing. "That was melodramatic, even for you."

"It worked. If you would excuse me for a moment, Will," Hannibal replied and started to turn. Will dove for the gun that Cole had dropped as he died and pointed it at Hannibal. Hannibal froze. Will pulled the trigger, and Eddie dropped behind Hannibal with a bullet hole in his forehead. Dale fell a split second later from the same. Will dropped the gun with a pained groan and Hannibal looked behind him at the dead men, then back to Will.

"Your aim has improved," Hannibal complimented.

"Shut up."

Chapter 11

Hannibal was by his side in an instant when Will started to slump to the ground. The older man's face and clothes were covered in blood. Will was no better off himself in that department, but for the moment he didn't care. Hannibal's arms around him were strong and warm…supporting, comforting. His fingers were gentle when they caught Will's chin and tilted his face to the side to examine the damage that had been done to him.

"It's looks worse than it is," Will tried lamely to brush off Hannibal's concern. The doctor frowned at him.

"I'm not sure of that," Hannibal's voice was soft but his words were laced with steel. Will could see the smoldering anger in those dark eyes as they took in every new injury on Will's body. Every new cut and bruise. The naked rage in those eyes made something warm glow in the pit of Will's stomach and he had to look away, avoiding Hannibal's gaze in a way he had not done since they'd first met.

A soft sound, a gurgling moan of pain, drew Will's attention and he focused on the man lying near them. Not dead. Not yet. Will's jaw clenched.

"Give me your knife," Will demanded. Hannibal raised a curious eyebrow at him but did not question him, merely pressed the handle of the sharp blade into Will's hand. Completely trusting that Will would not turn it upon him. Will had no intention to. Not today anyway. Instead, he turned to the man bleeding out on the ground next to him, dying, but still able to feel pain. Will growled as he plunged the knife into the man's crotch, pulling a gurgling scream from him.

He continued to stab him over and over, his hands and arms becoming saturated by blood. Will moved to his face next, slashing one side and then the other. Finally drawing the blade down from the man's neck all the way to his groin, splitting him open, following the same path Cole had touched Will. By then the man had stopped moving. Stopped screaming. Will swayed dangerously on his knees, and only then did Hannibal stop him, one hand grasping the knife, the other slipping around the younger man's waist to support him.

"Will…" Hannibal whispered and Will slowly looked away from what he'd done back to the older man. He felt the knife being pried from his numb fingers and he let it go without a fight. It clattered noisily against the floor but neither man cared. There was concern and something else in Hannibal's eyes as they locked onto Will's. Something dark. Hungry. Will didn't know what it was until Hannibal closed the small distance between them and pressed his mouth to Will's.

Will froze. For one panicked moment he thought Hannibal was going to bite him. But the lips against his own were soft. Surprisingly gentle. No teeth. Will gasped in surprise and Hannibal took advantage of it, slipping his tongue between the seam of his lips to taste just inside the cavern of his mouth. A soft groan escaped Will in spite of himself and his hands clenched in Hannibal's blood-soaked shirt at his shoulders.

The kiss tasted like blood. Not much of a surprise since they were both covered in it, more of it belonging to others thankfully than themselves. It should have been revolting, but all Will could think about… No... he wasn't thinking at all. If he'd been thinking, he never would have let Hannibal kiss him in the first place. He never would have kissed Hannibal back. He never would have clutched at the man and pressed their bodies closer, silently begging for more as arousal stronger than he'd ever felt in his entire life shot through him like lightning.

It was the noise Hannibal made, a low almost growl, when Will's tongue followed Hannibal's back into his mouth that finally shocked the younger man back to himself more effectively than being doused with ice water. Will pulled back but he couldn't go very far without falling, Hannibal supporting most of his weight at this point. Will was shaking. Breathing hard like he'd just run a marathon. Hannibal didn't look much better. His lips were parted and his breath came out in soft pants, there was something wild in his eyes. Barely restrained. The look made Will's insides feel like they were melting, and he had to hide away from it by pressing his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder.

"What... What are you doing…?" Will asked, hating how timid he sounded right now. Unsure. Overwhelmed. He had never really thought about kissing another man before, much less Hannibal, and… He never could have imagined how much something so simple could affect him. He'd never felt this way before when kissing anyone, like his entire world had just shattered around him and Hannibal was the only thing left whole and safe.

"Something I wish I had done on that cliff," Hannibal whispered into his ear, barely more than a breath, and another strong shudder nearly rocked Will to his core. What might have happened if Hannibal had kissed him on the top of that cliff? Would Will still have sent them both into the ocean? He didn't know.

"Hannibal… I can't… I…" It was too much. Too much. He knew Hannibal was in love with him. He'd known it for a while now. But knowing that was different from…feeling it. Hannibal usually kept it under such tight control. Now Will felt overwhelmed. He felt like he was truly drowning. He didn't know what he was feeling. Hannibal loved him. But he didn't love Hannibal, not like that… Didn't he?

Hannibal made a hushing sound and ran his blood soaked fingers through Will's hair.

"We need to leave, Will," Hannibal said and Will nodded against his shoulder. Yes, that was practical. Prudent even. They couldn't stay here. They were still in danger. More so the longer they remained. They needed to leave, but Will knew he wasn't going anywhere, at least not under his own power. All of his reserves were depleted. He barely had the strength to simply hang onto the other man.

Hannibal must have realized this too, since he didn't even ask Will if he could stand, he simply adjusted his hold on Will, one arm around his back and the other beneath his knees, and lifted the younger man into his arms. Will was too tired to think of protesting. Instead he looped his arm around Hannibal's neck and held on. By the time Hannibal got him into one of his kidnapper's cars, Will had already passed out.

He wished he could have killed them slower. After seeing what they had done to Will…

Hannibal's hands clenched on the steering wheel. The blood on his hands left dark red stains on the leather. He glanced over at the young man slumped in the passenger seat, the seat belt the only thing currently keeping Will upright.

Hannibal shouldn't have kissed him. He hadn't meant to. It had been a momentary loss of control. Potentially disastrous. Will wasn't ready… obvious from his reaction. He usually had more restraint. But seeing Will like that. Watching him kill. Covered in blood… he was so beautiful…and Hannibal had kissed him.

Foolish. He wasn't some blushing teenager and Will wasn't his first crush…

Hannibal felt himself smile in spite of everything. He was often foolish and impulsive when it came to Will Graham. It was very inconvenient. Would he have it any other way?

A few miles down the road, there was a small secluded house set back a little ways from the road. Hannibal killed the headlights and drove up the driveway slowly. All of the lights inside the house were off. Hannibal shut off the engine and got out of the car. It was easy enough to break one of the panes of glass in the back door to let himself in. He took care of the elderly couple inside quickly and painlessly. There was no reason for them to suffer. After taking the bodies to the basement, Hannibal returned to the SUV and drove it into the garage next to an old station wagon. That would be useful later. Hopefully it would be at least a few days before the couple were noticed missing. He and Will would be long gone before that.

Hannibal picked Will up again and carried him into the house. The younger man moaned softly at the jostling, coming around a little, and Hannibal was relieved by that. Hopefully Will was correct and the damage those men had done to him 'looked worse' than it truly was. He wished he could have taken Will back to the motel room, the medical equipment there was valuable, not to mention the money and passports. But it was too much of a risk. There was nothing there that could not be replaced with time and a bit of effort. Their escape would simply take a little longer than Hannibal had originally planned.

By the time Hannibal carried Will into the bathroom, the younger man was awake. Groggy, but awake.

"Hannibal?" Will looked confused as he gazed around the room, "Where are we?"

"Safe for the moment," Hannibal answered. He was glad that Will did not ask him to elaborate. The younger man probably knew he wouldn't like the answer. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Will made a sound of agreement, so Hannibal turned away from him for a moment to turn on the shower and adjust the temperature to a comfortable level, not too hot or cold. He helped Will step into the tub and lie down, supporting most of the younger man's weight as he did so. Then he stripped off Will's only layer of clothing. Will's cheeks colored and he looked away from Hannibal as he did so, but he didn't protest. Hannibal found a wash cloth and some soap and started to clean the blood off of him. He kept his touch as brief as possible. Clinical. No matter how much he might wish to let his touch linger along Will's skin, right now Will needed him as a doctor, nothing more. Once Will was as clean as he was going to get, Hannibal began inspecting his new injuries.

Most of it was merely bruising. He felt along Will's ribs to check for any fractures. Though Will hissed through his teeth in pain, Hannibal didn't think that was the case. Will's knife wound to the shoulder seemed fine. The wound on his cheek less so. Hannibal peeled away the ruined bloody bandage as gently as possible and growled softly under his breath when he saw the damage. The skin was heavily bruised and as he suspected several stitches had been torn.

"Give me a moment," Hannibal told Will, waiting for the younger man's slight nod of acknowledgement before he rose and went searching through the various cabinets in the bathroom for medical supplies. He found some gauze, a basic first aid kit that unfortunately didn't have supplies for suturing, but it did have sterile butterfly strips. They would have to do. Hannibal returned to Will's side and disinfected the wound as best he could and started to remove the broken stitches from the younger man's face.

Will remained still and stoic, not making a sound even though he was probably in a good amount of pain. He didn't move or speak until Hannibal was finished, taping the new bandage on his face.

"Thanks," the younger man muttered, and Hannibal nodded, passing Will two prescription-strength pain killers he'd found that had once belonged to elderly couple. Will offered another soft thanks before swallowing the pills down dry without any protest. That alone probably spoke volumes about how Will was feeling right now.

Hannibal found a bottle of shampoo and went to work washing the his hair next. Will closed his eyes and sighed softly at the treatment, relaxing into his touch. It surprised Hannibal a little, how much he enjoyed taking care of Will like this. He wondered if Will would still allow it when he was more recovered, and not only because he was far too exhausted and in pain to manage it himself.

"So what happened?" Will finally asked as Hannibal started to rinse the suds out of the younger man's hair, letting his fingers tangle in the wet silken locks. "When you left this afternoon."

"Two of them attempted to ambush me when I was in the convenience store. They failed, obviously. I was able to persuade one of them to divulge some useful information about their plans, how many were in their group, and where they were located, before he bled out," Hannibal explained.

"Did he tell you how they found us?" Will asked curiously.

"Hmm… yes. It seems my former caretaker was rather more forthcoming to the police than I would have liked. The make and model of the vehicle we were using has been made public. I believe it was more luck than anything that we were discovered so soon. Perhaps my 'disguise' was not as helpful as I thought," Hannibal joked. Will snorted.

"You make a pretty convincing lumber jack."

"Why, thank you, Will," Hannibal replied with a small huff of amusement.

“How about who sent them in the first place? They said they had ‘orders’, they weren’t working independently,” Will went on, serious again.

“Unfortunately I was not able to get that information. I am not sure they even knew who had hired them,” Hannibal stated thoughtfully. The man had been surprisingly forthcoming once Hannibal started removing his fingers…with his teeth. If he’d known he probably would have told Hannibal.

“They weren’t professionals,” Will said. Hannibal snorted softly.

“That much was obvious.”

“So Alana didn’t send them.”

“I would be insulted if she had,” Hannibal replied, and Will’s lips quirked a little. Will was clean. Hannibal shut off the water, wanting to save some warm water for himself once he’d finished taking care of Will. He found some towels and dried Will off then helped the younger man out of the tub. He half-suspected Will would insist on walking out of pride, but he didn’t. So Hannibal carried him into the spare bedroom in the small home, since he hadn’t yet had the chance to clean the master bedroom.

“They wanted me alive…” Will mumbled softly, nearly half-asleep again already.

“A fact for which I am immeasurably grateful,” Hannibal replied honestly, and Will looked at him curiously.

“Would you have come in guns blazing if they hadn’t?”

Hannibal looked down at Will, lying pale and bruised against the crisp white sheets, and felt his heart twist a little in his chest. He wasn’t sure what he would have done if they had simply killed Will instead of trying to use him as bait.

“I would have made them suffer for it,” he finally answered, and Will hummed thoughtfully. Hannibal smiled, “May I ask you something now, Will?”

“Hm?”

“When did you know?” Hannibal asked.

“That you were playing possum?” Will clarified, and Hannibal nodded. “As soon as we walked in. I thought it was funny as hell.”

“Obviously. You made it quite difficult to remain still after that.”

Will grinned up at him sleepily, unrepentant.

“How did you know?” Hannibal asked curiously, though he suspected he already knew the answer, he wanted to hear it.

“It wasn’t your style,” Will said simply. “Sure, it was grotesque and horrifying, and all your kills are like that. But it was too…messy. You didn’t want them looking too close at the bodies. Not this time. Even your worst Ripper killings there was always something…artistic about your work. You wanted people to look. To be horrified but unable to look away at the same time.”

Hannibal wanted very badly to kiss Will again right now. Will might have seen that as well because the younger man unconsciously licked his lips.

“It was always beautiful…” Will admitted and Hannibal could no longer resist. He leaned in to press his lips softly against the younger man’s. The barest caress, but he could still feel how Will’s pulse jumped at his neck when Hannibal’s fingers trailed along his throat. He pulled back before he could let himself become too lost in the feeling. He’d left a small smear of blood on Will’s lips. Before he could wipe it off Will’s tongue darted out again to taste it and Hannibal made a sound in the back of his throat that was almost pained. Will’s eyes watched him, wide, almost terrified.

Not now.

Hannibal forced himself to take a step away.

“Get some sleep, William,” Hannibal suggested, then turned and forced himself to walk away. He waited for a moment just outside the doorway to see if Will would call him back.

He didn’t.

Chapter 12

What the hell was he doing?

The metallic taste was still in his mouth and he couldn't get rid of it. It wasn't his blood. It wasn't even Hannibal's. It was someone else's. He'd known it was there. He'd felt it stick to his lips when Hannibal had kissed him, and he'd…

Will covered his face with his hands. What the hell was wrong with him? He should be disgusted with himself, but if he was being honest, disgust was one of the last things that Will was feeling right now. The taste of the blood in his mouth. It reminded him of when he and Hannibal had killed the Red Dragon together. Then, it had mostly been his own. But not all of it. Not by the time it was over. He remembered how powerful he'd felt then. Not like he was now, this weak broken thing. Blood had also been in the kiss Hannibal had given him not even an hour ago. In that abandoned store, surrounded by the bodies both he and Hannibal had killed. While it hadn't been the most passionate kiss that Will had ever received. It was almost chaste in fact. At the same time he'd never felt anything so intimate before. He'd never felt so aroused…

He wasn't disgusted. Exactly the opposite. He hated himself for it.

Will turned his face into the pillow and let out a frustrated scream into it, muffling himself so that Hannibal would not hear him. This wasn't him. He wasn't like this. He'd been telling Hannibal the truth when he said he only *tolerated* his wickedness. He didn't *want* to like killing. He didn't *enjoy* hurting people. He wasn't like Hannibal. Yet he had enjoyed killing Francis Dolarhyde. He had enjoyed killing the sick bastard who'd kidnapped, beat, and threatened to rape and kill him today. Randall Tier. Garret Jacob Hobbs. It had felt good killing them too. What did that make him?

Will's chest felt tight and he coughed hard into the pillow. It hurt. He should be used to being hurt by now, shouldn't he? For all his charm and sophistication, Hannibal was a sadist at his core. Hannibal enjoyed seeing people in pain. He enjoyed causing it. Even to Will. Even now. But Will didn't hate him. It would be easier if he *did* hate Hannibal, but he couldn't. Even after Hannibal had threatened his family. Even after everything Hannibal had done to him. Even knowing the man probably would end up killing him, one way or another, one day, Will still didn't hate him.

But did that mean he had to *love* him? Was this even love? If it was, it was so sick and twisted no *normal* person would ever define it as such. Obsession maybe. Definitely unhealthy. But the horrible truth was, he had missed Hannibal for those three years the doctor had been locked away in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Every time Will had thought he'd finally forgotten about him, something would remind him of Hannibal. A song similar to the classical pieces Hannibal used to play in his kitchen while he cooked. Or a flash of color reminiscent of those stylish suits that would have looked garish on anyone else, yet Hannibal always looked so dignified in. A smell would make his mouth water for one of the doctor's most forbidden meals…

He'd feel sick, horrified, angry… but he'd *ache*. He'd ache so badly it was all he could do not to grab his keys, jump in his car, and drive nonstop to where he knew Hannibal would be, waiting for him, just to see him one more time. Of course the urge had lessened over time, but it had never completely gone away. Now Hannibal was here, he was free, and he was with Will.

Will still ached. He wanted things he should not want from Hannibal. Ever. No sane person would.

Guess that made it official. Will Graham was insane.

He laughed harshly and began to cough again, harder than before. Will clutched at his chest as his heart twisted in pain he wasn't sure was physical or emotional. Who was he? What was he? What would he become if he stayed on this path? If he stayed with Hannibal? He could see it. He could see himself becoming like Hannibal. The hunger. The thrill of the hunt. The power of taking a life. The pleasure… He could see himself standing next to Hannibal, wearing a stylish designer suit, his hair immaculately coiffed, the scar on his cheek making him look dangerous and exotic rather than ugly. Sipping expensive wine, the delicious aroma of their most recent kill filling the kitchen as Hannibal cooked. Hannibal smiling at him, so full of pride at what he had created… It would be easy. To become that. To let everything Will Graham had once been die. For something else to be reborn in his place.

No. He didn't want that. He didn't want to *become* that. Even if it would be easier. Even if it would be less painful in the end. But he didn't want to give up Hannibal either. He didn't want to leave and it had nothing to do with the threat Hannibal had made. Will just wanted to be with him. That desire hadn't gone away even after Abigail, even after he'd chased Hannibal halfway around the globe intending to kill him, even after three years of trying to forget about him.

But how? How could they possibly remain together? Especially now that he knew Hannibal wanted even more from him? He didn't think Hannibal would ever try to force him (that would be rude), but…

His chest felt heavy. Tight. His heart was beating too fast. Panic attack. The thought flickered through his mind. Recognizing it for what it was, and yet the knowledge did nothing to calm him. He started to cough again and he couldn't seem to stop. He couldn't breathe. It hurt.

Hannibal stood in the shower, his hands braced against the cool tile wall, his head bent as the hot water ran over his shoulders. He was thinking about Will, of course. He often thought of Will these days. Perhaps that was inevitable, caring for the younger man every hour of every day as he had been. But even when Will was not present, maybe especially then, his thoughts often centered around the younger man.

One might call it obsession. Another might call it love. Hannibal was not sure if either was accurate. Perhaps they both were.

Will had fascinated him from the moment they had met. How could he not? Will's gifts were extraordinary. Pure empathy. Pure imagination. Able to assume the emotional point-of-view

of other people, even those that scared or sickened him. Beautiful. If anyone had the ability to see him, to understand him, it was Will Graham. Even Abigail could not truly understand him. Alana… He'd told her the truth. No one else. Only Will. Perhaps that was how it was meant to be. How could he not be drawn to Will like a moth to a flame?

Yet in truth, both of them had been capable of drawing in and burning one another. Perhaps that had been part of the appeal as well. Always that hint of danger. Working alongside Will. Alongside the FBI. Standing next to the him while Will looked upon his work; all Will had to do was glance at him at the right moment, see him for what he was, and the game would be over. Always a chance of Will finding out before he was ready. It had thrilled him, excited him, in a way that simply killing hadn't in years.

Hannibal thought back to before he had met Will Graham. Yes, he had become bored. Hunting had become almost more of a chore than an enjoyment. Even throwing his special dinner parties to his elite 'friends' no longer amused him. But then Will Graham had come along and everything had changed. Hannibal had been more than ready for a new challenge.

With Will he'd gotten more than he'd bargained for.

He wasn't sure exactly when the 'act' of befriending Will had become more than that. No longer a part to play in an effort to get closer to the fascinating young man, but a genuine desire to become closer. Friendship. True friendship. Hannibal wasn't sure he'd ever really experienced it. Of course there were those who thought themselves as his friends, and that he might even claim as such among company. But they were only ever props in the theater of his life. They had a part to play, as did Hannibal. A necessary performance to ensure his freedom all these years. To maintain his illusion. None of it had been real. Mere camouflage. The roles they held had only ever been minor. It was all they could be. They were never his equals.

Not like Will Graham.

His growing feelings for Will had taken him by surprise. He hadn't even realized just how much he'd come to rely on Will's presence in his life until he'd lost it. His plans had come together flawlessly. He should have been proud at winning the game, yet the victory had felt hollow. During Will's incarceration, Hannibal had come to the stunning realization that he actually missed the younger man. Not the game. Will had somehow turned from a pawn to an opponent, and while Hannibal knew he could continue playing the game alone, the idea didn't appeal to him at all. It was dull. He missed the challenge. He missed Will.

And so Hannibal had done something he'd never done before. He changed the rules. He unmade all his carefully laid plans at great risk to himself. All so Will could be returned to the playing field. But Hannibal no longer wanted Will as his opponent in the game. He wanted Will as his partner. Companion. Friend.

Hannibal ran one hand over his wet face and pushed back his hair with a heavy sigh. Even then he had not considered that his feelings for Will would grow to this extent… Or in this particular direction. He was not a man who sought out sexual partners for the sake of pleasure alone. His 'relationship' with Alana had been convenient and served a purpose. Multiple purposes. An alibi. More camouflage to hide his true nature. The side benefit of inciting jealousy in Will was a bonus (though whether he was jealous for Alana or *of* Alana even

Hannibal was not sure of to this day). The sex had been enjoyable enough in the physical sense, but tedious. He'd felt no real passion for Alana. He would never be so rude as to leave a lover unsatisfied, but he often found himself concentrating on other matters while pleasuring her. A new recipe he wanted to try. The patients he would be seeing the next day. The kill he was planning. Will. Of course, Will. He never could seem to exorcise the younger man from his thoughts very often. Alana often seemed to enjoy herself the most when his thoughts were preoccupied with Will. Perhaps that should have been a clue to him. Then of course there had been Bedelia, the utter perverseness of their physical relationship, playing at husband and wife, had amused him for a time. But, again, he'd quickly grown bored and ceased giving her such attention fairly quickly.

But Hannibal had never thought of Will directly in a sexual manner. He'd never thought about kissing him, touching him, fucking him. He hadn't even had such thoughts when he'd been preparing to go away with Will, to create a family . Himself, Will, and Abigail together. Perhaps his mind had shied away from such crude thoughts before because Will meant far more to him than a mere hole to fill. The crudeness of it was practically disrespectful.

But he had not been lying to Will when he said he wished he'd kissed him at the top of the cliff. Or perhaps he had wished that Will would have kissed him. Sex with Will hadn't even been at the forefront of the drive then either, but the intimacy of the act of taking a life together with Will. The thrill of it. The passion that far transcended mere physical. Hannibal had never felt so close to anyone before, and he'd wanted to feel even closer. He had never wanted that before with anyone else.

Desire. To be as close as humanly possible to another being. Skin to skin. Touching. Tasting. Joining. The pleasure of such connection. While Hannibal had performed the physical act before, he'd never wanted it as much as he did now. This was not an act. This was not an experiment. This was not a means to an end. He simply wanted Will, wanted to touch Will, to kiss Will, to fuck Will. He wanted to give Will pleasure and take pleasure from him in return. Because he was Will. For no other reason.

The fact that he was having these desires for a man was less alarming to Hannibal than the fact that he was having them at all. When he had long thought himself incapable. Yet here he was. Just another lovesick fool pining after something he couldn't have? Perhaps. Perhaps not. For a few moments Will had returned Hannibal's kiss, after all. They had never talked about Will's sexual preferences during their sessions, or much about Will's sex life in general, unless Will himself brought it up. Which was not often. But when he did, the impression Hannibal got was that the he was inclined towards women.

Hannibal shook his head in frustration and growled softly, angry at his foolish thoughts. It did not matter much at the moment what Will's preferences were. Even if the younger man was open to considering a physical relationship with him, at present time he was in absolutely no condition for it. It was a waste of time devoting energy to such thoughts right now.

Perhaps later. But not now.

With that in mind, Hannibal turned off the shower and reached for the towel he'd set in reach before he got in. He dried himself quickly then donned a soft gray robe that was a little too short and a little too tight around his shoulders, but it would do for now. He started back

towards the room he'd left Will in, and when he heard the familiar wheezing, choking noises he quickened his pace in alarm.

Again?

As he suspected, Will was in the middle of another panic attack when Hannibal arrived and he was at the younger man's side a second later. He took Will's hands in his own and squeezed them to let him know he was there.

"Will? Can you hear me? I'm here. You're all right. You're safe. Concentrate on your breathing. Slow, with me. In. Out. Count with me if you can." Hannibal spoke in a calm, reassuring tone, hoping to help lower the younger man's anxiety.

"Hann…ibal…" Will choked out and Hannibal hushed him.

"Don't try to talk if you can't. Just breathe. I know it's scary, but it's not dangerous. Breathe," Hannibal continued. Will reached for him, grasped the robe he was wearing desperately. Hannibal pulled Will into his arms and wrapped them securely around Will. "Just breathe. Listen to my heart if it helps."

He adjusted his hold on the younger man so that Will could do just that, pressing his ear against Hannibal's chest while Hannibal's fingers gently pet his hair. Gradually the almost violent tremors began to ease. Will's breathing slowed, though it remained more labored than Hannibal would have liked. The younger man's heartbeat began to return to a more sedate pace.

"Sorry…" Hannibal heard muffled against his chest eventually.

"No need to apologize, Will. Though this does seem to be developing into a pattern, doesn't it?" Hannibal kept his tone as light as possible hoping to further calm the younger man. Will snorted softly.

"Maybe I just don't like you showering?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps being alone is part of the trigger?" Hannibal suggested, his tone a little more serious than before. "Would bathing together help ease your fears?"

Will remained utterly silent and he'd gone tense in Hannibal's arms. He'd pushed too far. Hannibal sighed in regret.

"Forgive me, Will. I did not meant to make you feel uncomfortable," he apologized genuinely. Normally someone else's discomfort amused Hannibal greatly, but not in this case. Not now.

"Not your fault…" Will finally muttered then coughed hard, his entire body shaking with it. Hannibal frowned not liking the sound at all.

"Will, can you lie down for a moment?" Hannibal asked and helped pry Will's fingers off of the robe he was, thankfully, still wearing this time at least. Once Will was lying flat, Hannibal began examining the younger man. He checked his pupils and his pulse. He unfortunately

didn’t have a stethoscope any longer but he pressed his ear to Will’s chest, listening carefully, thankful that Will didn’t protest. Even without it Hannibal didn’t like what he heard.

Will seemed to be recovering well from his head injury, all things considered, but his lungs were still suffering complications from his near drowning. He’d been giving Will antibiotics to try to keep him from developing pneumonia, but it had been hours since his last dose. Hannibal pressed his hand to Will’s forehead, not the most accurate measure, but he could still tell that the younger man was warmer than he should be.

Damn.

Chapter 13

The little bell above the door jingled when Jack Crawford stepped inside the small town convenience store. The town itself was barely big enough to be put on a map. The store was even less impressive, with little more than an attached gas station. Not important enough to even deserve a name other than ‘general store’. Today however, the little no-name store in the middle of nowhere had suddenly become national news, as the site of two grisly murders, potentially committed by the escaped Chesapeake Ripper.

Jack had to push past several reporters barely being held back from the scene by the state police that had been called in to assist the local sheriffs. He ignored their shouted questions, barely sparing them a glance, though he was thankful at least Freddie Lounds had not been among them. Yet. Inside the store a young deputy (one of the only two local sheriffs) and taking a statement and trying to comfort the visibly-shaken store clerk who had discovered one of the bodies.

Jack gave the deputy a slight nod to continue as he passed by. He would want to question the girl himself later on, but for now he was content to let the local law enforcement handle it. The sheriff himself, and elderly man with thinning hair and troubled eyes, was waiting in the back storage room.

“Sheriff Carter?” Jack asked, and received a nod.

“You Mr. Crawford?” the sheriff asked and Jack nodded, giving the offered hand a firm shake. The sheriff motioned him to follow. “It’s back here. Dunno if this is your guy or not, but…frankly, I’ve never seen anything like this in all my years.”

Jack nodded in understanding, following the older man as he was led a little further into the back area of the store. It was a very tight space, not much room to move around in and dimly lit. There were signs of a struggle. Some knocked-over boxes, their spilled contents sitting in a wide pool of blood. The sheriff and Jack stepped around the blood carefully, not wanting to disturb the evidence for the forensics team. The body itself was propped up behind a stack of boxes. Male. Caucasian. Nothing seemingly remarkable about him at all other than his neck being cut open from ear to ear. Jack unconsciously rubbed the scar on his own neck.

“Do we have an identification on the body yet?” he asked the sheriff, who shook his head.

“No wallet on him. He ain’t from around here. I’d almost chalk it up to a mugging gone bad except…” The older man trailed off, visibly paling before Jack’s eyes.

“The other body?” Jack inquired, and received a shaky nod from the sheriff, “Show me.”

After another nod, the sheriff began to lead Jack out the back, avoiding the trail of blood, most likely made by something being dragged across the floor.

“Your people are already out there,” the sheriff confirmed as he led Jack into the nearby woods behind the store. They’d already walked a good ways into the trees before Jack began

question the man further, if only to break the uneasy silence around them.

“The store clerk found the first body?” he asked, earning a nod from the older man.

“Yup. Says she let a customer use the back restroom, and a few minutes later these two go back after him. Not listening when she tells them no one is allowed back there. So she calls Emmet.”

“Your deputy?” Jack clarifies and receives another nod.

“Yeah. She thinks they’re going to start some trouble or something. Get into a fight maybe. But she says all was quiet back there. Scary quiet. She finally goes back there herself to check on things and finds the first man; he was already dead. Gave her quite the fright.”

“How did you find the other body?” Jack asked, noting just how far they were moving into the woods. The store was no longer visible through the trees. The area was quite isolated.

“Emmet called me right away when he got there, but when he saw the blood, he decided to follow the trail. Thought someone might have been hurt. Lad is a damn fine tracker,” the sheriff explained.

“He found the second body?”

“What was left of it.”

With those words, they passed around a thick cluster of evergreens and stood on the edge of a small clearing. Price and Zeller were already there, collecting evidence. The entire area was cordoned off with yellow police tape. The body…or what was left of it…was in the middle of everything.

“Jesus,” Jack muttered under his breath.

“It’s him, isn’t it? That Lecter fellow. He did this?” the sheriff asked him. Jack couldn’t help but recall when he used to ask Will the same question in order to confirm whether or not a body had been a victim of the Chesapeake Ripper. This time however, he didn’t need Will to confirm it. He knew.

“Yes.”

Hannibal sat on the edge of the bed where Will slept fitfully. The younger man wasn’t thrashing or yelling. Not yet anyway. But that might have to do with the heavy sedatives that Hannibal had borrowed from the elderly couple’s medicine cabinet and crushed into Will’s drink before giving it to him. Hannibal didn’t want to take any chances on Will waking while he was gone.

The sweaty young man muttered something unintelligible in his sleep and Hannibal reached over to place his hand gently against Will’s forehead. Will stilled at the touch but didn’t wake. The heat underneath Hannibal’s palm felt nearly scalding.

It had been several days since he and Will had been attacked by their unknown assailants. The bodies in the basement were beginning to smell despite the cold, and Will's condition had steadily worsened during that time as well. Hannibal had risked driving by their old motel in the station wagon to see if it would be feasible to retrieve their belongings, money, passports, and especially, the much needed medical supplies for Will. But as he'd suspected, the presence of the police in the area made it too much of a risk to attempt. Hannibal had not exactly been discrete when questioning the men who'd attempted to attack him in the convenience store. By now, perhaps even Jack was nearby, searching for them.

Will coughed wetly even in his sleep. Every breath the younger man took was a painful wheeze. Hannibal had done what he could to care for Will with what meager supplies he did have. Tried to lower his fever with cool compresses and over-the-counter medication. Tried to ease the congestion in his lungs with hot showers, but it did little good. As the fever spiked, Will's night terrors grew worse. That, combined with his persistent coughing kept Will from getting much rest without medication. He was becoming dehydrated as well. He could barely keep down plain water or simple broth. Without antibiotics, Hannibal was beginning to fear Will would not pull through this.

At least he'd finally located what he hoped would be a reliable, and relatively safe means, of procuring them for Will.

Hannibal brushed Will's sweaty hair off of his forehead and adjusted the covers around the younger man's shivering form before he rose from the bed and slipped out of the room. Will should sleep until he returned.

He took the old couple's station wagon and drove for nearly an hour to a small emergency vet clinic that doubled as something of an animal shelter. Staffing was very minimal at this time of the night, only one veterinarian and assistant, who Hannibal dispatched with ease. Using the veterinarian's keys, he unlocked the cabinet where the prescription drugs were kept, and began loading the medicine he needed into the bag he'd brought with him. He also took any other supplies that would be useful to a human patient: saline, syringes and needles, suturing supplies…

The bag now full, Hannibal started to leave when a soft high-pitched growl from one of the cages unexpectedly caught his attention. As he approached the cage, the sound increased in volume, but only by a small amount. Inside, a small brown pup with shockingly yellow-green eyes was shivering and watching him warily.

It was no dog.

Curious despite his need to return to Will as quickly as possible, Hannibal put down the bag and picked up the chart sitting on top of the cage. As he read his suspicions were confirmed. The pup was part of a litter of wolf-dog hybrids that had been seized by animal control from a man who'd been breeding them illegally in apparently appalling conditions. The mother had been in such poor condition she had been put down shortly after being rescued. None of the other pups had survived, and this pup was not doing much better, as it has been refusing all food offered to it by the staff. The name and address of the illegal breeder was included in the information, for the record, though Hannibal knew in most cases like this very little, if anything, was done to those responsible for animal cruelty.

Hannibal was drawn out of his thoughts when he felt a slightly scratchy tongue licking hesitantly at his fingers he'd placed on the cage while he read. The pup had cautiously drawn closer to him while he'd been distracted and now hungrily licked the blood of the vet's assistant which was drying on his fingers. It shrank back with a soft whimpering growl when Hannibal looked down at it. Hannibal stayed still, and the pup slowly regained its courage and started licking at his fingers once more while he watched and considered.

He opened the cage.

Will had that weightless floaty feeling that he only got when he was high on pain killers. His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton and his chest felt as if a heavy weight was pressing down on it. His throat was dry and scratchy and the urge to cough was strong, but he managed to swallow it back. He shivered, feeling cold, even underneath the covers tucked around him.

"Will? Are you awake?" He heard Hannibal's voice from somewhere nearby, and offered a weary grunt in response. Even that apparently was too much, as it immediately triggered a coughing fit in spite of his wishes. The weight on his chest shifted and then abruptly disappeared… Will frowned in confusion and slowly tried to pry his eyes open even though they felt glued shut.

He was greeted by a blurry patch of brown and something cold and wet poking at his cheek before a slightly scratchy tongue began licking at his face. Will spluttered in shock and blinked rapidly. He heard a soft chuckle nearby before he finally managed to focus on a pair of yellow-green eyes looking right into his own.

Will struggled to reach up, the slight pinch of an IV needle tugging in his wrist with the movement, and his fingers tangled in slightly coarse fur. The puppy was distracted from licking his face by his fingers, and it began to lick and nibble on them instead, allowing Will a better view of its small body and enthusiastically wagging tail.

"What-" Will muttered in confusion, and a movement in the corner of his vision drew his attention away from the puppy to Hannibal, who was watching the whole interaction with apparent amusement, "The hell? Hannibal?"

Hannibal sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I thought you might enjoy some company other than mine while you're recovering," Hannibal gave as an explanation before reaching over to lay a hand against Will's forehead. The pup gave a yelping bark at Hannibal and then began to attack the hem of the shirt the man wore, tugging at it with a little growl, as Will watched bewildered.

"Do you have any idea what that is?" Will croaked out, coughing again. Hannibal hummed slightly before removing his hand, then checked Will's pulse at his other wrist before answering.

"An unexpected find to be sure. Your fever has gone down, at least. The antibiotics seem to be working. How do you feel?" Hannibal asked calmly, as though a little wolf pup wasn't

currently using the corner of his shirt as a chew-toy.

“Like shit,” Will answered honestly, but he supposed he did feel slightly better than the last few days, “Confused.”

Will clicked his tongue and the pup abandoned Hannibal’s shirt to look back over at him. He wiggled his fingers and the pup wandered back over to lick at them. The animal was on the skinny side but looked to have a full belly at the moment. Its tail began wagging again at Will’s attention. He scratched at the little ears and the pup yawned happily. Will couldn’t help the small smile and huff of laughter that escaped his lips.

He looked back to Hannibal when the pup started to curl up beside him, and the older man watched him with an unmistakably fond expression.

“Why?” Will asked.

Hannibal didn’t answer, not in words anyway, but he did reach over to caress the corner of Will’s smiling mouth with his thumb...right before he leaned over to press his lips to Will’s. The pressure light and almost chaste. It was over almost as soon as it began, and Hannibal stood.

“You should get some more rest, and think of a name for your new friend. I’ll make us some dinner,” then he was gone.

The doctor returned with a bowl of what smelled like chicken soup sometime later to find Will absently petting the puppy which slept contently at his side. Hannibal sat on the edge of the bed and helped Will slowly eat. Though it was delicious, Will wasn’t able to stomach much of it. Still, it was more than he’d been able to manage in days, and his eyes began to grow heavy with exhaustion almost immediately after his meal. The pup greedily ate the pieces of meat left over from Will’s meal, and Hannibal watched with a smile.

Chapter 14

It wasn't difficult to find the motel as it was the only room and board for at least thirty miles. The store clerk had already confirmed the identity of Hannibal Lecter when she'd been shown a recent photograph of the man. The owner of the motel also confirmed renting the room to Lecter several days prior.

Neither of them had seen Will.

The SUV that had been described by the caretaker of Hannibal's property was still parked outside of the room. Inside the room there were signs of a struggle, the missing medical equipment from the ambulance, several bags of clothes, money, and passports for both Hannibal and Will.

Jack stood in the middle of the room, police officers and forensics moving around him collecting what evidence they could in the hopes that they could piece together what had happened here. More importantly, they'd hopefully find a clue where Hannibal and Will had gone.

The plain gold ring sitting forgotten on the table beside the bed felt somehow even more damning than the blood they'd found. Jack planned on having a photograph of it sent to Molly as soon as possible to confirm his theory that it belonged to Will. The DNA from the blood on the wall, floor, and surgical scissors would take longer. What if it belonged to Will? If it was Will's blood, there wasn't enough of it to suggest he'd been wounded fatally. At least, not here. If Hannibal had harmed Will, it was possible they'd find the body elsewhere 'artfully' displayed… Or they might not find him at all if Hannibal decided to 'honor' Will as Garret Jacob Hobbs once had.

Would Hannibal really kill Will now, after everything? Jack wasn't sure he could reliably predict what Hannibal was capable of anymore. Or Will, for that matter. Jack still wasn't sure he shouldn't be treating Will as a suspect on the run, rather than a potential hostage, despite what he might want to believe. Will had already admitted to him once that he'd wanted to run away with Hannibal Lecter…right before Hannibal had gutted him.

"Jack," Zeller pulled him from his thoughts and he turned to face the dark-haired man with a raised eyebrow.

"Got something?" he asked, and was rewarded with a nod as Zeller handed a folder over to him.

"We've got identities on the two bodies found at the convenience store. Arnold and Richard Goldman, brothers, both part of a known militia group a few towns over. Anti-government, gun-loving, redneck types. A few priors. Assault. DUI's. Nothing big, though. Turns out they aren't the only ones from the militia group that have been reported missing, though," Zeller explained while Jack flipped through the information on both men and their associates.

“We might be looking for more bodies then,” Jack concluded with a frown. It didn’t explain why these men had targeted Lecter in that convenience store. Had they recognized Hannibal and thought to bring him in themselves? Or was it something else?

“There’s more, Jack.” The younger man’s ominous words once more drew Jack from his contemplation, he continued without waiting for Jack’s prompting. “We got word just now of a break-in at an animal clinic about an hour north of here. Two women, dead. One… One of them was missing organs.”

Hannibal was in the kitchen cooking them dinner. Elvis (oh how pained Hannibal had looked when Will had announced the name of the pup) eagerly sniffed around the older man’s feet waiting for the occasional scrap of meat to fall to the floor. Will couldn’t help but smile at the way Hannibal effortlessly stepped around the animal weaving around his legs, occasionally grabbing and tugging on the doctor’s trouser leg and growling playfully while the man worked.

Will was still more than-a-little shocked that Hannibal had brought the pup back with him from wherever he’d gotten it. While the doctor had tolerated Will’s dogs well enough, he never seemed overly fond of them, and they had all been grown and well-trained to behave. He had the feeling Hannibal hadn’t quite known what he was getting into when he’d given Will the puppy. A half-wolf puppy at that. Still, Hannibal tolerated the messes and mischief the pup got into with a surprising amount of grace. Even when the playfully-growling pup attached itself to Hannibal’s pants leg, only to be dragged along when the doctor kept walking rather than pay attention to the demanding creature.

Will chuckled, barely managing to disguise it as a cough from his seat at the dining table. Hannibal turned to look at him with a raised eyebrow, not at all fooled. Will ducked his head to hide his smile and went back to peeling the potatoes Hannibal had given him to keep him busy. This was as strenuous an activity as he was allowed, the first time Hannibal had allowed him out of bed for days, and Will was unwilling to be banished back to the bedroom so soon. The fact that Will actually looked forward to peeling potatoes was only proof of how impatient Will had become with the enforced bed rest. Though the pup had certainly been a welcome distraction during that time.

He hadn’t even noticed Hannibal’s approach until he felt the doctor rest a warm hand on his shoulder, close enough that his thumb brushed against Will’s neck, making him shiver slightly.

“Are you cold?” Hannibal asked, adjusting the blanket wrapped around Will’s shoulders, another stipulation of being allowed out of bed. Will, cleared his throat and shook his head slightly.

“I’m fine,” he insisted, reaching for another potato. Hannibal gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze, his nails scratching lightly along Will’s hairline at the back of his neck, before he reached for the potatoes Will had already finished.

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal offered before returning to his place by the stove. Will’s entire body felt flushed with heat that had nothing to do with sickness.

Hannibal had never been shy about touching him. Even from the beginning, the doctor had a way of inviting himself into Will's personal space, and for some reason Will had allowed it, even when he shied away from most others. Will's rudeness and naturally standoffish nature were defense mechanisms that effectively kept away all but the most determined to break past his barriers, However those defenses had never seemed to work on Hannibal Lecter.

Jack also had a way of bulldozing his way through Will's carefully maintained defenses, practically dragging him back into a place Will never wanted to go. Somehow he'd convinced Will of the need to use his 'gifts' for the greater good. No matter what damage it might do to Will in the process. Using guilt and a sense of obligation as a weapon against him. Will could admire Jack's tenaciousness even as he resented him for it. Hannibal had been different. Hannibal hadn't broken through Will's barriers, he'd seeped around them like some kind of poisonous fog. Slipped in through the cracks and crevices, wearing away the fissures until gaping holes were left that Will had no hope of repairing.

When he'd first met Hannibal, Will had been determined to hate him. The last thing Will thought he needed at the time was another shrink picking through his brain trying to analyze him, and find out how he ticked. He'd been resentful of Jack forcing the psych evaluation on him, and it would have been easy to use that as an excuse to quit helping Jack altogether. Looking back now, maybe that's what he should have done.

But against all odds, and Will's insistence that he didn't find Hannibal all that interesting, the psychiatrist had surprised him. Hannibal had done something unexpected. Tricked him, was probably the more accurate term. Reverse psychology; now Will felt a little foolish for falling for something so simple. Hannibal's little 'rubber stamp' had surprised him, and removed the pressure Alana and Jack were exerting on him to talk to someone after killing Hobbs. Will could have taken that piece of paper, walked out of Hannibal's office, and never looked back. Hannibal might have even let him. Instead, for the first time in his life, Will found himself actually wanting to talk to someone. He'd let Hannibal into his head. As easily as he'd let the doctor into his motel room when he'd come bearing breakfast that first time. That alone was monumental. In fact, for someone like Will, allowing Hannibal into his physical space had seemed far less intimate.

It had started slow. Small touches that almost went unnoticed at first. The brushing of fingers when an object was passed between them. A comforting hand on his shoulder. A touch to his forehead to check for fever. The touches had steadily grown bolder, and by then, Will had become so used to not denying Hannibal, he hadn't even thought to protest when they went well beyond what colleagues – even good friends – might deem appropriate. Standing so close that he could smell the doctor's cologne even at the end of the day. Hannibal holding his hand while washing and bandaging his bloody knuckles. Cupping the back of his neck, their foreheads nearly touching, as Hannibal pried a gun from his numb fingers. An almost gentle caress to his cheek, holding him, comforting, even as a cold blade drew a line of fire through his gut...

Hannibal had never asked for permission before taking such liberties, and he didn't ask now. But much like then, Will didn't think about denying Hannibal these liberties. Such as Hannibal helping him to use the toilet, since he was still too weak to support his own weight while taking a piss. Or Hannibal's hands in his hair while he bathed, soapy fingers massaging

his scalp even though Will could wash his hair perfectly fine on his own. Lingering long after the suds had been rinsed clean. A hand on his shoulder, or hip, to guide him back to bed.

Then of course, there were the kisses. Those were certainly new. But again, Will found himself allowing them without much though. While they were certainly more intimate than any touch they'd previously shared before, it was surprisingly easy to pass them off as a mere extension of the same closeness he'd always allowed between them. Sometimes Will would turn his head away at the last minute before their lips could touch and Hannibal would chastely kiss his cheek or jaw instead, but he never pushed for more. In this, it seemed, Hannibal was waiting for Will to make the next move. If only Will had any idea what that was.

Will frowned as he carefully guided the sharp knife around the potato in his hand.

He'd told Chioh, so long ago it seemed, that he'd never known himself as well as when he'd been with Hannibal. If only that were the case now. In fact, he wasn't sure he'd ever felt so lost and unsure of himself. He was even more unsure of Hannibal.

Will hadn't questioned when they'd moved again. He hadn't needed to. The faint smell of rot coming from the basement, had told him enough. It didn't bother Will nearly as much as it probably should have. They did not go far, as Hannibal probably didn't want to move Will too much in his condition and risk another relapse. At least their current hiding place had been empty before they'd got there. Had probably been foreclosed for for a while if the length of the lawn was anything to go by. At least the utilities were still on.

A lot of things like that went unspoken between them. Will never questioned how Hannibal had gotten a hold of a half-wolf puppy in the first place. Just like he didn't question now from where Hannibal had gotten the meat they were about to eat. They did not speak much of anything, in fact, even though Will wanted to say so much. He just didn't know how, and the discussions they did have felt forced to the point of being uncomfortable. They hadn't spoken so little to each other since the three years Hannibal had been locked away in a mental hospital. It was…frustrating. Again, Elvis had proven a welcome distraction between those uncomfortable silences.

Hannibal was patient. Shockingly so. Perhaps waiting for Will to come to terms with… everything. But they were bound to reach the breaking point. Probably sooner rather than later. Will was almost terrified of what would happen when that moment came.

He wasn't paying attention like he should have been and felt the sharp bite of the knife in his thumb before he even realized it had slipped.

"Shit!" he cursed before he could stop himself, dropping the knife and holding his dripping hand away from the food as best he could. Hannibal was by his side again in an instant.

"What happened?" the doctor asked, almost cradling Will's hand in his own as he inspected the damage.

"Nothing. Wasn't paying attention. It's fine," Will reassured, and it was true. The cut wasn't very long or deep. Probably wouldn't need more than a simple band aid. He tried to take back

his hand, however he was prevented from doing so when Hannibal's fingers tightened firmly around his wrist.

"Let me see," Hannibal ordered and his tone made Will abruptly still. Hannibal brought Will's hand closer to his face for the inspection, turning it this way and that as he examined the damage carefully, then hummed to himself, apparently satisfied by Will's diagnosis. Will expected to get his hand back after that, so he was surprised when instead, Hannibal brought his hand to his mouth. Will felt himself flush again and his mouth dropped open in shock. A gasp caught in his throat as Hannibal's lips curled around his thumb and sucked.

Will's heart hammered against his ribs and his eyelids fluttered. A strained moan escaped his parted lips before he could silence himself when Hannibal's tongue curled around his thumb, licking away every trace of his blood. Elvis barked, having grown impatient by the lack of attention and treats, and Will came back to his senses abruptly.

He snatched his hand out of Hannibal's hold and stood abruptly, swaying a little, feeling light-headed and not at all steady.

"I need to lie down," was all Will gave as an explanation, before reaching down to pick up the pup. He escaped from the kitchen to the bedroom.

"Of course, Will. I'll bring you dinner when it is ready," Hannibal's voice followed him, sounding far too calm, and Will wasn't sure whether he was grateful or disappointed by the small reprieve.

Chapter 15

The taste of iron was still hot on his tongue and Hannibal licked his lips unconsciously as he cooked, savoring the lingering trace. It had only been through great restraint that he'd allowed the younger man his momentary escape to the other room. He'd had serious thoughts to throwing Will over the table and making a meal out of him in a way that might not satisfy one hunger but would certainly sate another.

Will had looked quite delectable sitting there. Wearing nothing but a simple white undershirt and pale gray sweatpants. A blanket wrapped loosely around his shoulders, and his hair still damp from the bath Hannibal had recently helped him with. Pale skin flushed and practically panting while Hannibal sucked the blood from his finger.

Hannibal closed his eyes and breathed deeply through his nose, allowing the smell of cooking meat and vegetables to replace the scent memory of Will's skin. Will was still recovering from his injuries and sickness and ravishing the younger man in this state would be rude at best. Especially given the very mixed signals that Will was giving, much to Hannibal's displeasure.

Hannibal was nothing if not patient. But he could not deny that having Will in his complete care was a temptation hard to resist. As Will regained his strength his dependency upon Hannibal would naturally lessen, but for now Will relied on him for everything from food and medical care to companionship. Textbook Stockholm syndrome. True, there was still some lingering resistance, but it was token at best. Hannibal was sure it would only take the right kind of push before Will's remaining doubts were swept away. By the time the young man was fully healed, he was certain that Will would no longer wish to flee.

He had a plan to help Will overcome whatever doubts were still holding him back. It was one of the reasons why they lingered despite the growing police presence in the area. Will was well enough now that Hannibal no longer feared traveling would overly stress the young man or set back his recovery. Especially when Will had been so much more calm after the introduction of the pup, a reaction Hannibal had been hoping for. Will's dogs had always had a soothing effect on the younger man and Hannibal was willing to tolerate the animal's presence for Will's benefit, for now. Once Will was a little stronger, perhaps as early as tomorrow evening, Hannibal could set the next phase of his plan into action. For now he would enjoy Will being completely dependent on him.

Dinner was a simple fare. Roasted meat and vegetables. Will wouldn't complain. In fact the younger man seemed to enjoy the quick and simple meals Hannibal cooked for him now just as much as the elegant and expensive dinners he'd used to prepare for just the two of them in his old Baltimore home. Still, Hannibal looked forward to when he could finally cook in a decently stocked kitchen again. At least this time their meal wasn't from a can.

He separated their food onto two plates, along with two glasses of water and silverware, onto a tray and carried it to the bedroom where Will was resting. Though 'hiding' was probably a more accurate word, Hannibal thought with a small smile.

Holding the tray with one hand he politely knocked before opening the door. There was no actual bed in the room, but when they arrived he'd arranged a small pile of blankets and pillows on the carpeted floor for a little extra comfort. Will was lying in the small 'nest' now, tossing a rolled up sock as a makeshift ball for the puppy to chase. Though both paused in their game when Hannibal entered. Will looked up at him and though there was a pretty blush on his cheeks he seemed far more composed now.

"Dinner?" He asked, and Hannibal nodded. Will whistled to the pup and it trotted over to the young man obediently with the sock in his mouth. Hannibal had to admit, Will did have a way with animals. Dogs at least. The pup finally seemed to have tired a little from playing with Will and laid down beside the younger man chewing contently on the sock. Hannibal helped Will to sit up and then set the tray of food between them. He handed one of the plates to Will and the young man muttered a genuine sounding thanks before he began eating.

"My pleasure, William," Hannibal replied, and he meant it. Watching Will eat something he had prepared always gave Hannibal a euphoric feeling that bordered on sexual. With others, especially when dining with Jack, all Hannibal had ever felt was a dark amusement. It had been a joke. A game. Even if Hannibal was the only one laughing or knew the rules. With Will, it had always been different. He felt more than mere amusement sharing his kills with Will. With Will, it had been a gift, not an insult. He probably should not be surprised any longer that everything would always be different when it came to Will.

He'd especially felt it when they had shared the meal Will had provided the meat for. That may have been the night that Hannibal had truly fallen in love with the younger man. Hannibal had of course known immediately upon tasting the meat that it was not pork. Watching Will take a bite, knowing it had been Will's kill, and Will fully aware of what he was eating… The memory was of course soured by later betrayal, but Hannibal had high hopes that the memory could be replaced soon by another similar one. Real this time. A kill they'd made together…

He was staring at Will's mouth now, while he ate, and Hannibal knew it was rude. Yet every time he forced himself to look away he found himself drawn back. Will knew he was being watched, and he kept his eyes shyly averted but there was still a light pink staining his cheeks that wouldn't fade. The color only seemed to grow more pronounced the longer Hannibal stared.

He wondered if Will had any idea how alluring he looked right now. Probably not. Will had always undervalued his physical beauty. Even went to great lengths attempting to disguise it behind unflattering clothes, a nearly unkempt tangle of curls, surly demeanor, and glasses hiding expressive eyes that saw far too much. There was nothing for Will to hide behind now. He was exposed to Hannibal now in a way Will rarely allowed himself to be. Naked in all but the physical sense.

Temptation given form.

For a moment Hannibal's fingers itched for a stick of graphite or charcoal and paper to capture Will's image with. He'd drawn Will often in the asylum. Late in the night, always facing away from the cameras so they could not see his work. Always destroying the drawings as soon as they were completed. They were for him alone. No one else. He

committed this image of Will to his memory palace now, as he had so often before, to recall later when he could indulge the temptation properly. Though surely the first picture he would draw when he had the opportunity was of Will in the moonlight covered in blood.

Hannibal licked his own lips and watched as Will's blush began to move down his neck and disappear beneath his t-shirt. Hannibal's eyes followed the path and it was all Hannibal could do not to growl in the back of his throat as he watched Will's pulse jump at his neck. Will's breath quickened noticeably and he did not dare meet Hannibal's eyes.

Maybe he would not have to wait as long as he thought.

They finished their meal together in silence. The tension in the air around them undeniable. Will handed him his plate and utensils when he was done, but instead of taking the dishes back to the kitchen Hannibal set them on the tray and pushed it aside out of the way. The curious pup immediately went to investigate and lick at the dirty plates but Hannibal paid it no mind. Will's eyes remained hooded by his dark eyelashes and avoided looking directly at Hannibal but he knew the younger man still watched his every movement like a hawk.

Hannibal moved slowly as to avoid spooking the younger man further. His fingers lightly taking and lifting the other man's injured hand as though in inspection. Will had placed a simple bandage on it from the first aid kit and the small cut was no longer bleeding. Not that Hannibal had been expecting it to be. Still, Will seemed to relax a little. Will was well used to Hannibal administering to him as a doctor by this point. While Hannibal had been steadily pressing on those boundaries he had not outright crossed them. Yet.

He brought Will's hand to his lips and brushed a nearly chaste kiss along the back of his knuckles, doing his best not to smile when the younger man seemed to stop breathing entirely. He did it again, pressing a firmer kiss directly to the spot where Will's wedding ring used to rest. There was a subtle but immediate shift in the air then, and Hannibal lifted his eyes to find Will finally looking directly at him. Ah, there he was, finally. Unmistakable anger blazed in those piercing blue eyes, Will no doubt recalling the circumstances under which the ring was removed. With everything that had happened, Will probably had not forgotten, but it had been put to the back of his mind temporarily. Hannibal had not forgotten, and he certainly had noticed that Will had taken it off at some point.

Hannibal gave the younger man a devilish smirk and Will tried to jerk his hand away, but he tightened his grip, preventing the other man from pulling away. His smile slipped away as Will scowled darkly at him but that did not stop him from raising Will's hand to his lips once more. This time turning it over to kiss the inside of Will's wrist, directly over his pulse. He held it there for several moments, feeling Will's heart beat furiously against his lips.

"Hannibal…" There was a question, a plea, and a warning all wrapped together.

"Will…" He whispered the young man's name against his skin, kissing the fragile flesh again with genuine tenderness. When their eyes met again, Will's were still guarded, but Hannibal knew he did not imagine there was also longing.

He lifted his free hand to rest his palm against the side of Will's face, his thumb lightly brushing the edge of the bandage over where Dolarhyde had stabbed Will. He felt the slight

flinch at his touch, Will no doubt remembering another time when Hannibal had touched him so. His touch had been tender then too. He'd held Will to him lovingly, even petting his hair in a comforting manner, as the younger man tried to keep his intestines from spilling from his gut. Despite that remembered pain, Hannibal knew he did not imagine Will leaning slightly into his touch now.

"I… wanted to go with you…" Will whispered barely above a breath. Hannibal gave a small nod. His fingers tracing lightly along the younger man's brow. The scar left when Hannibal had taken a saw to Will's skull. He tucked Will's hair behind his ear.

"I know." Hannibal replied.

Will you come with me now ? The question hung unasked in the silence between them. Hannibal knew the answer Will would give, and it would not be the one he wanted to hear. Or it would be a lie. They were both different men now and things were not so simple, not that they'd ever been. He would ask later. Soon. But for now…

Hannibal leaned into Will's space and the younger man did not pull away. The kiss was soft. Sweet even. Nothing they had not done before. When Hannibal cupped the back of Will's neck and allowed his tongue to slip past the younger man's slightly parted lips to taste him deeper he felt Will tense slightly but he did not pull away. So Hannibal continued. Teased the younger man's mouth open more. Tilted his head for a better angle and allowed the kiss to deepen. He felt more than heard the small moan that escaped Will and his hands came up to grip Hannibal's biceps hard.

Hannibal's hand slid slowly down the length of Will's back easing their bodies closer together. When he reached the small of Will's back, he allowed his hand to slip underneath the thin shirt to caress bare skin instead. This time Will's groan was definitely audible.

"Lie back," Hannibal urged gently when their lips parted. Will's soft panting breaths were warm against his lips, and though he hesitated a moment, he obeyed. Lying flat against the pile of blankets and pillows and staring up at Hannibal with a slightly guarded look in his eyes, though there was heat and need there as well. Hannibal's touch shifted from Will's back, trailed along his side, and came to rest warm against his stomach when the younger man finally settled. He could easily feel the scar he'd given Will against his palm, and though he would have liked to take the time to explore it in great detail, he resisted the temptation. He didn't want Will to put his defenses back up just yet.

Hannibal shifted to lay beside Will, smiling.

"Are you comfortable?" He asked and Will nodded. Hannibal began to lightly trace along Will's prominent ribs and was rewarded with a slight twitch of the younger man's mouth. Ticklish apparently, "Let me know at any time if you're not."

Another nod and Hannibal leaned down to kiss Will again. The younger man returned the kiss without resistance and as his tongue explored the warm cavern of Will's mouth his hand began to explore the soft skin of the other man's chest. Will's skin was warm but not feverishly hot as it had been and nearly hairless except for a sprinkling of slightly coarser strands starting below his navel that disappeared underneath the waistband of his sweatpants.

Will shivered when Hannibal's nails scratched through it before moving up underneath his shirt further than before.

Will's muscles twitched when Hannibal's thumb ghosted around the edge of one nipple, his breath catching in his chest. Hannibal's lips curved into an almost wicked smile against Will's mouth before he bit down lightly on the younger man's lower lip at the same time he scraped his nail over the hardening bud. Will made a choked sound and bucked, one of his hands coming up to clench in Hannibal's shirt near his hip. Hannibal continued to tease the nipple, lightly circling, and flicking the hard nub. His tongue thrusting against Will's in an unmistakably lewd suggestion of what else they could be doing, perhaps later, when Will was stronger.

The young man whimpered when Hannibal bit his lip again, sucking softly on the swollen skin, before drawing back to observe his handiwork. So little and Will already looked wrecked. Sweat dampening his brow, skin flushed, teeth sunk into his own swollen lip in a vain attempt to silence the needy sounds he was making due to Hannibal's ministrations.

Hannibal abruptly abandoned Will's sensitive chest to cup the younger man's obvious erection through the cotton sweatpants and Will nearly shouted.

"Hannibal!" He could easily feel the near scorching heat of Will's cock through the layer of cloth, and Will's hand suddenly clamped down on Hannibal's side. Hannibal hissed as pain mingled with pleasure as Will's fingers dug into his still healing bullet wound but he did not tell Will to stop. Instead he watched with unmasked hunger as Will trembled and pushed his hips up into his hand.

"Will," Hannibal brushed his lips over the younger man's brow, his cheek, the corner of his mouth, and finally the junction of Will's jaw and neck. Will whimpered in response when Hannibal squeezed him and his head tilted back, giving him better access, earning a pleased growl from Hannibal. His tongue traced along Will's racing pulse as his hand slipped under the waistband of Will's pants. The younger man keened when Hannibal's fingers circled his cock.

Will was not going to last long. He could feel it the way Will's cock twitched in his hand and how precum practically dripped from the tip as Hannibal's thumb swiped over the slit and teased at the glans underneath the head. Will clutched at him harder, thrusting into his hand, and Hannibal lifted his head from the bruise he'd suckled into the younger man's skin to watch eagerly as Will came apart.

"Will, look at me. See me," he ordered, speeding his hand stroking Will to completion. He honestly wasn't sure if Will would obey him. But those perfect blue eyes snapped open almost immediately at his command, staring deeply into Hannibal's eyes. Whatever Will saw there, it was apparently enough, because immediately after the young man came with an almost agonized shout. His seed spilled hot and sticky over Hannibal's hand and his own stomach, and his whole body shook as the elder man stroked him through it.

Hannibal made a pleased sound in the back of his throat as he watched, gently easing Will down from the heights of his orgasm with gentle kisses and touches. He finally released the younger man when Will's twitching had all but subsided and carefully eased the now soiled

sweatpants down Will's thighs. He waited until Will had opened his eyes to look at him again, an unmistakably sated sheen in them, before Hannibal moved. He shifted lower, the younger man's eyes watching his every move, until Hannibal's mouth hovered directly over Will's spent cock. Hannibal smiled and Will's eyes widened as the older man bent his head and began licking the younger man's semen from his stomach and thighs with long wet strokes of his tongue.

"Oh my god," Will gasped and squirmed, and Hannibal's hands clamped down on the younger man's hips, holding him in place until he was finished. Once Will was clean to his satisfaction he sat up once more and licked his lips in an exaggerated manner, his eyes never leaving Will's.

"Delicious.

Chapter 16

Six police officers escorting Hannibal Lecter shot to death at the hands of Francis Dolarhyde. What should have been the end of both the Tooth Fairy and Hannibal the Cannibal instead had become a bloodbath on the highway.

Francis Dolarhyde dead at the hands of Will and Hannibal, apparently working together.

Two police officers and two paramedics, killed responding to Hannibal's fake 911 call.

Two men killed in a convenience store, their motives still uncertain, one tortured to death and mutilated.

Two women killed at a veterinary clinic.

An elderly couple killed in their own home.

Seventeen people dead, that they knew of, in only a few short weeks. All of their blood on his hands. All because Jack had allowed Hannibal Lecter to escape.

All because he had trusted Will Graham.

Jack sipped slowly at a bitter and lukewarm coffee, his third cup since he'd woken this morning. He'd returned to the crime scene at the motel in the middle of bumfuck nowhere. Sadly, even though the scene was nearly a week old, it was the only concrete lead they had. The last confirmed location of Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter.

The animal shelter turned out to be a complete waste of time. While Jack would bet good money that the two dead women who'd worked at the clinic had been killed by Lecter, especially considering the large portion of thigh muscle and organs missing from one of the women, there was no hard evidence tying Hannibal or Will to the scene. The missing drugs and medical supplies from the clinic suggested that Hannibal might have been trying to replenish the supplies that had been left behind at the motel. Unfortunately, due to the lack of evidence, they couldn't rule out a simple robbery gone bad, or even a copycat conveniently trying to lay the blame on the infamous 'Hannibal the Cannibal', as unlikely as that was.

The latest report of an elderly couple found murdered in their home a few miles away was far more promising. Fingerprint and DNA evidence collected put both Hannibal and Will at the scene, unfortunately the decomposition rate of the bodies suggested that Hannibal and Will had left the premises several days ago at least. The couple's car was discovered yesterday, abandoned, two towns over, wiped clean, and with no evidence of where Hannibal or Will had gone from there. Most likely they had acquired a different car somewhere in town, but there had been no reports of missing or stolen vehicles. Despite an extensive search, no one could confirm seeing either man in the area. Given the rural nature of the area, surveillance camera footage was also extremely limited.

Each day, each new body that was discovered, Jack's frustration grew.

This might be the best, the only, chance they had of catching Hannibal Lecter again. In all these deaths, if there was one thing they had in common, it was that they reeked of desperation. There was none of the finesse, bordering on artistry, of the Ripper kills. Hannibal wasn't killing because he wanted to. He was killing because he *needed* to. Hannibal was vulnerable in a way that he never had been before, and Jack was certain that had a lot to do with Will.

One way or another.

Will's exact condition was uncertain at best, but he was definitely wounded. Potentially seriously. Either from the fight with Dolarhyde, the fall from the cliff, or even by Hannibal himself. Hannibal had already killed twice for medical supplies. Jack did not think those supplies were for Hannibal himself, at least not all of them. That meant Hannibal was treating someone. Keeping them alive. Hopefully that person was Will. If Will was wounded enough that he could not travel, then that might be the reason Hannibal had remained in this area for so long.

That would not be the case forever. Eventually Hannibal would move on. They had to catch Hannibal before that could happen. But despite Hannibal's disadvantage, law enforcement was still one step behind the killer.

But someone hadn't been. Something had happened in this motel room. Whatever had happened, it had been unexpected. Not part of Lecter's plan. Too many extremely valuable items had been left behind. Money. Passports. Clothes. Medical equipment. Not to mention far too much evidence from the normally very meticulous killer.

Some of the blood they'd found had definitely belonged to Will. They'd also found blood belonging to three other people. None of the blood was Hannibal Lecter's. None of the blood belonged to the men killed at the convenience store, or any of the recent victims. Hannibal had been attacked at the convenience store. Had Will been attacked here? There were still members of the militia group who were unaccounted for. If they were responsible, how had they managed to find Will and Hannibal so quickly? What had been their plans for Hannibal and Will once they had them? Perhaps more importantly, had they succeeded or failed?

Jack had a feeling if he could understand what happened here, he might be able to get one step ahead of Lecter for a change.

"Mr. Crawford!" Jack's musings were interrupted by a shout from the motel owner who was now making his way over. Jack resisted the urge to roll his eyes or sigh in frustration at the annoying man who had been complaining about, but thankfully not downright interfering, with their investigation for the last several days.

"Yes, Mr. Miller, how can I help you?" Jack responded with forced politeness, but with an edge of impatience that made the balding man pause, and apparently rethink his words or tone. He continued in a far more subdued manner.

"I was just wondering when my cleaning staff might be able to get back to work. It's been a few days now, and I have a business to run," the motel owner went on, and Jack didn't bother to restrain a sigh this time.

“As you’ve been told before, Mr. Miller, as long as my team is gathering evidence, it is considered an active crime scene, which I can’t allow you or your staff to disturb,” Jack reiterated, bordering on angry this time. The balding man quickly changed tactics.

“Of course, of course. What I meant was if it was all right for my staff to take care of some of the other rooms. I’ve had quite a few customers wanting to check in, and I’m running out of space,” Mr. Miller said, wringing his hands a little nervously. Jack knew this already of course. More and more news crews had shown up daily, and they’d required more and more help from the state police to keep them at bay in the small town. Mr. Miller of course was thrilled with the extra business, of which he’d probably not seen in years. Not to mention the ‘attraction’ of being a location where the infamous Chesapeake Ripper had been sighted. The whole god damned town would probably end up being a twisted tourist location in the upcoming months.

Jack gave another frustrated sigh but nodded.

“All right, Mr. Miller. As long as they don’t get in the way of the forensics crew,” Jack said, and the manager nodded vigorously.

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Mr. Crawford,” the man said before thankfully scurrying away, apparently to speak to his staff. Jack went back to drinking his coffee until his cell phone rang.

“Crawford,” he answered, hoping it was Price or Zeller with something he could actually use. Before he could even begin listening however, the sound of a woman’s scream made everyone in the vicinity freeze for several moments. Then everything happened at once. Jack rushed over to the motel room that had just been opened. Reporters began trying to push their way past the police who fought to keep them back. Mr. Miller fainted where he stood next to the cleaning woman who was still screaming.

Inside the room there were two bodies. A man and a woman both with their throats cut.

...make that nineteen.

Will woke slowly from a deep dreamless sleep. He felt relaxed and well-rested for perhaps the first time in weeks. His mind was surprisingly clear and untroubled, especially given the events of the night before. While some memories of last night made heat flood to his face, and other parts of his body, he was surprised not to feel any kind of guilt or shame. There was none of the uncertainty or doubt that he expected to feel, given he’d just had his first sexual experience with a man. With Hannibal Lecter no less. Never mind that he was still technically married, even if he had no intention of returning to his wife.

Instead he felt…like a tension that had been building inside of him for days – perhaps even years –had finally been released. It felt…good. It felt right.

Will rolled onto his back slowly, mindful of his still-healing body, but also enjoying the lazy languid feeling still lingering in his muscles that sex always gave him. Good sex anyway. It had definitely been that. He couldn’t deny that he had very much enjoyed it. In fact, it might

have been one of the most intense sexual experiences he'd ever had, despite the fact that all it had really amounted to was some pretty heated necking and a hand job.

Guess it was true what they said. It wasn't so much what was done, but who it was with that made all the difference.

Hannibal hadn't even wanted him to reciprocate. After he'd finished 'cleaning' Will, the man had crawled back up his body to kiss him again deeply and all Will could do was moan almost whorish at the taste of his own seed in Hannibal's mouth. Still coming down from his high, and before he could think whether or not he should offer to give Hannibal a similar hand, Hannibal had shifted position until he was spooning up behind Will, wrapping his arms around his waist, and urging him to get some sleep. Will had thought briefly of protesting, especially considering the obvious erection he could feel pressing rather insistently against his ass. But instead he found himself yawning in exhaustion. Between lingering weakness from his illness, and a very relaxing orgasm, he found himself asleep in minutes. The last thing he remembered was Hannibal's fingers almost petting his hair, and the elder man nuzzling affectionately at his ear.

He'd expected to wake in a similar position. Or perhaps he'd been hoping to? But he was alone. Even Elvis was gone, leaving Will completely alone with his thoughts. Perhaps that had been intentional. Perhaps Hannibal thought Will would need that time to collect himself. To…process…everything.

But as Will examined his feelings, he felt a surprising amount of contentment. It wasn't something Will experienced often, so it took him a little while to identify it. He wasn't upset with Hannibal for pushing the boundaries between them, yet again. He wasn't all that surprised how much pleasure he'd taken in Hannibal's touch. He did not regret what they had done. Given all the…baggage…between them, it was almost funny how anticlimactic it felt now that they'd had sex. Then again, they'd already shared things far more intimate than mere sex, so maybe this new facet of their relationship wasn't such a surprise. More likely it had been a long time coming.

Will sighed heavily as he slowly stretched. As he stared up at the ceiling, he allowed his fingers to trail lightly over his stomach, recalling the way Hannibal had touched him. He was still naked from the waist down so it was all too easy to let his fingers press into the light bruises Hannibal's fingers had left on his hips. His skin tingled, remembering the sensation of the elder man's touch exploring his chest, teasing his nipples and his cock.

He felt his breath quicken and his pulse jump as he ran his fingers over the very tender mark at the base of his throat. Will snorted softly in amusement. He wouldn't have thought Hannibal would be into something so juvenile as hickies. But then again, Hannibal was nothing if not possessive. He'd already left his marks on Will in so many ways. Physically. Mentally. Will would be lying if he claimed he hadn't enjoyed it as well. Feeling Hannibal's mouth on him. His tongue. His teeth. Never knowing if the next bite was going to be pleasurable, painful, or even lethal.

Will's teeth sank into his lower lip to stifle a small moan that tried to break free.

All right, he definitely wouldn't be opposed to having sex with Hannibal again. It probably wasn't a very good idea to add sex to their already extremely volatile relationship, but... Maybe next time he'd reciprocate, see if he could make that calm mask Hannibal wore slip. Though the result, if or when that happened, was unpredictable at best. Maybe that was part of the thrill.

He smelt food cooking, which answered the question of where Hannibal had gone. Will contemplated whether he wanted to get up or enjoy the peace without Hannibal hovering for a little while longer. It wasn't as though Hannibal would let him go hungry.

Will's rumbling stomach made the decision for him, so he slowly untangled himself from the nest of blankets wrapped around him and found a clean pair of sweatpants to put on. He slowly made his way to the bathroom first, and then to the kitchen, a little surprised to find he was actually looking forward to seeing Hannibal this morning. He wondered if the man would still look at him like he had last night. Like Will was everything he had ever wanted… Or could Hannibal be having doubts of his own? Could Hannibal possibly be having regrets about what they'd done last night?

Those thoughts vanished the moment he entered the kitchen. Hannibal turned away from the stove to look at him and smile warmly.

"Good morning, Will. Breakfast is almost ready." His tone was polite, but the way his intense eyes raked over Will's rumpled form was anything but. Hannibal looked like he'd gladly throw Will down on the table and devour him instead of breakfast, and it made something tighten in Will's gut. Hot and fluttery with anticipation. God... that he could have that kind of effect on Hannibal…

Will's stomach growled again, breaking the moment, and he felt himself flush a little in embarrassment. But Hannibal didn't seem to mind, his smile indulgent as he moved away from what looked like frying eggs and bacon to pull out a chair for Will at the table. Will mumbled a thanks as he sat, noticing Elvis already had his head in a bowl of what looked like leftovers from last night. The pup was so intent on his own breakfast he didn't even look up as Will entered the room. Will smiled in surprise as Hannibal set down a mug of coffee in front of him. Hannibal hadn't allowed him any caffeine yet with his medication, despite Will's grumbling. Apparently the elder man was in a very indulgent mood this morning. Will wasn't going to complain.

"Thanks," Will said, taking a blissful sip of the coffee. Which was, of course, prepared just the way he liked it. Hannibal squeezed his shoulder affectionately before returning to the stove. Will watched him work for several minutes. It was surprisingly relaxing. Hannibal always seemed very at home in a kitchen, no matter who it belonged to. Even the few times he had cooked in Will's home in Wolftrap. He moved in the space easily, every movement of his hands well practiced, though there was always a bit more of a flourish to even the simplest movements when Hannibal knew he had an audience. He liked to show off.

Will hid a smile behind the rim of his mug and turned his attention to the newspaper sitting on the table. It had today's date on it to his surprise, which meant that Hannibal had gone out at some point this morning. It always made Will nervous whenever Hannibal went out; he wasn't exactly inconspicuous, and every cop for a hundred miles was probably hunting them.

It would be all too easy for him, for them, to be caught unawares. It had already happened once already.

On the front page of the *Meadsville Tribune* was a story about the murder at the convenience store in Hartstown, PA. Apparently it was still big news in such a small town, even after several days. Which wasn't all that surprising. The title of the article was *Cannibal on the Loose* which made him roll his eyes, but it was the picture of Jack Crawford standing in front of their motel that gave him pause. He glanced over at Hannibal, and though the man wasn't looking at him, he certainly didn't believe Hannibal wasn't paying attention. He probably wanted to see what Will's reaction was going to be.

Will cleared his throat as he looked back down at the grainy picture.

"Jack's here," Will finally commented as Hannibal came over to the table and placed a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast (also probably acquired on Hannibal's early trip out) in front of him.

"Yes," Hannibal replied, giving nothing away. He took a seat across from Will at the table with his own food. Will looked at him and Hannibal was definitely waiting for something. Exactly what, Will couldn't really guess. So Will simply picked up his fork and began eating. Hannibal did the same, and the silence was heavy between them for several moments before Will spoke again.

"We should probably go soon," Will said, and just like that, the almost oppressive air lifted and he could breathe easier. He'd made his choice.

"This evening," Hannibal agreed and the rest of the meal was silent. Will continued to read the paper while he finished eating and drank his coffee. Hannibal took his plate from him when he was finished, and brought him a fresh cup of coffee, his fingers brushing lightly over the back of Will's hand when he placed the mug beside it. Will turned his hand and gave those fingers a brief squeeze which made Hannibal still beside him. When Hannibal returned the gesture, Will's lips quirked in spite of himself, and that light fluttery feeling in his chest intensified.

Hannibal eventually released his hand and went to wash the dishes. Elvis chased at his ankles as always looking for leftovers. Will smiled and went back to the paper, marveling at the simple domesticity of it all. Could it really be so easy?

For a moment he thought it could be, then he turned the page of the paper and noticed that Hannibal had circled an article. Something about a missing girl, one of several apparently, over the last few months. Will looked over at Hannibal with a frown.

"What's this?" he asked. Though Hannibal did not look at him, he had the good grace not to pretend he didn't know what Will was talking about.

"Something I've been looking into, I will tell you more about it tonight," Hannibal said, and Will's frown deepened. When had Hannibal had the time to 'look into' something like this? Will read the article in more detail. Four girls in total, ages ranging from ten to fourteen, gone missing from the area in the last nine months. The last one had disappeared about a week ago. No evidence of kidnapping. No bodies ever discovered. Possibly runaways, even though

it was unusual for such a rural area. The local police were on the case of course, but hadn't uncovered anything useful. Not much of a surprise. Had Hannibal noticed something? What exactly?

That light feeling had definitely faded at this point, replaced by something else, dark, coiling unpleasantly in his gut. But he couldn't tell if it was dread or anticipation.

Chapter 17

The day passed relatively normally, or at least the kind of normal that Will had become accustomed to lately. After breakfast Will went to lie down again and took Elvis with him. The energetic pup was happy to have his full attention now that he was fed, and Will spent most of the morning playing with and training the pup.

Hannibal left them to it for the most part, only interrupting once to give Will his medication, and spent the rest of his time preparing for their departure. Will overheard Hannibal making a few phone calls, arranging to have money wired and new forms of identification made for them, and Will couldn't help but be impressed. With safe houses and large bank accounts in aliases all over the world, it seemed the man had a contingency plan for everything. Jack would definitely have his work cut out for him.

Listening as Hannibal made plans, Will guessed heading north into Canada would probably be their next step. From there they could lay low for a while, then charter a flight to take them virtually anywhere in the world. It probably would have been quicker to get into Canada from Hannibal's cliff side home in Maine. In fact, that had probably been Hannibal's original intention. But Will's condition would have raised far too many questions had they tried to cross the border then. Jack probably had the borders locked down tight at this point, but Will wasn't worried. In this, Hannibal seemed to know what he was doing.

It took several hours, but Hannibal finally seemed satisfied when he finished his calls and instead turned his attention to packing up their meager belongings and erasing all signs of their brief stay here. Will, in turn, spent much of the afternoon taking a nap and resting since he still got tired easily. He wanted to be as alert as possible when they finally got moving.

When Hannibal finally woke him in the evening the sun had already set. Hannibal had handled getting everything else packed into the car already, and that only left Will and Elvis. Hannibal helped him dress in a comfortable pair of jeans and long-sleeved flannel shirt. He insisted Will wear a jacket as well, even though Will didn't really think it was all that cold out, but Hannibal wasn't taking any chances with his health.

He didn't know where Hannibal had gotten the car, and he didn't ask. Will sat in the passenger seat with Elvis in his lap while Hannibal drove. Despite his earlier confidence, he couldn't help the nervousness he felt. He expected to see flashing lights around every corner. Roadblocks. Patrols. Hell, even Jack himself. It was probably irrational; Hannibal had made far more improbable escapes, but he couldn't help it.

Will wasn't sure if he was more afraid of what might happen to Hannibal, or to himself, if they were caught. Or if he was afraid what he might do if they were caught. There was no way Hannibal would let himself be captured again. He would run. He would fight. He would kill if he had to. Hannibal would expect Will to do the same.

Could he do it? Kill another person to keep Hannibal from going to prison or back to the mental hospital? There was a good chance Will would be in the cell right next to Hannibal if

he didn't. Or he could try to convince people, as Bedelia once had, that Hannibal had forced him to run with him. It wasn't even all that untrue. He could be damned more convincing than Bedelia. Hannibal might even forgive him for it. Or not. More likely if Jack ever caught up to Hannibal again, he'd put a bullet into Hannibal the second he saw him. Would Will try to stop Jack if that happened? Could he kill Jack?

Will closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. He already knew the answer to that. People had already died to ensure Hannibal's freedom. He might not have pulled the trigger with his own hand, but six cops had died directly due to Will's actions. If Will really didn't want Hannibal to go free, he could have stopped him. Picked up one of those guns left lying in the road and put a bullet in Hannibal's head the way Jack had expected him to do. But he didn't.

He wouldn't, couldn't, see Hannibal in a cage again. No matter how much he might hate himself afterward, he would do whatever he had to, to prevent that. Will had thrown them both off a cliff rather than face the truth of what he was capable of when it came to Hannibal Lecter. He couldn't run from that truth any more than he could run from himself. Any more than he could run from Hannibal…

Will startled slightly when he felt the brush of Hannibal's fingers over the back of his hand where it rested on the center armrest between them. He opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Hannibal, and the man gave him a brief smile before turning his attention back to the road. Will allowed his fingers to slide apart so that Hannibal's fingers could slot between them. The elder man's fingers curled around his hand and their hands remained joined like that for nearly an hour as Hannibal drove. Hannibal only took his hand back when he pulled off the road unexpectedly onto a long dirt driveway. Will frowned in confusion.

"We're almost there," Hannibal explained.

"Where are we going?" Will asked as he sat up and looked into the pitch black trees on either side of them. Surely Hannibal couldn't be thinking of stopping so soon. Elvis, who'd been dozing in Will's lap, suddenly perked up, taking a surprising interest in the area outside their car.

Hannibal turned off the headlights of the car as he continued slowly along the driveway by moonlight alone. After about a half mile drive into the woods, a dark shape of a house came into view. Hannibal stopped the car a good ways away from the house. Probably so it wouldn't be seen, or heard, by whoever resided within. Only then did Hannibal finally begin to explain.

"This is the home of Vernon Douglas. Three weeks ago, animal control seized several wolf-dog hybrids he had been breeding illegally. The animals were half-starved, abused, kept in filthy conditions. Many of them had to be put down. A few escaped. Some of the younger pups were taken to an animal hospital for treatment. Only one survived," Hannibal looked down at Elvis in Will's lap, though he didn't need to at that point. He had a feeling where this was going.

"Why did you bring me here, Hannibal?" Will asked in a whisper, even though he already knew the answer. Hannibal wanted to kill this man. No, he wanted *Will* to kill this man. The worst part was, Will knew he could do it easily. He would feel very little, if any, guilt

afterwards. But he still couldn't believe Hannibal would bring him here...for this. Like some kind of twisted...test.

"Tell me something, Will. Would you ever say to me, Stop. If you loved me, you'd stop.?" Hannibal asked him, and all Will could do was blink at the man in stunned surprise. Hannibal looked back at him, his expression giving nothing away.

He didn't doubt that Hannibal loved him. As much as Hannibal could possibly love anyone. But he didn't think for one minute that Hannibal would stop killing just because Will asked him to. Then he realized it really didn't matter whether or not Hannibal would stop killing if Will asked him to.

Hannibal was a killer. It was as simple as that. You couldn't expect a predator to go against its nature. Perhaps you could train it. Take away its claws and teeth. Try to domesticate it. Force it into a cage. But you couldn't turn it into something else... not without breaking it. Maybe Hannibal could stop killing, for Will. But he would forever resent Will for it. For not accepting Hannibal as he was. Will would forever hate himself for turning Hannibal into something he's not.

"No," Will admitted, causing Hannibal to raise an eyebrow, encouraging Will to continue. Will laughed ruefully. "I can't ask you to be something you're not."

They'd already been down that road before, and it had nearly destroyed them both.

He felt Hannibal's hand touch his own, squeezing gently. Only then did Will realize how tightly he'd been gripping the armrest and forced his fingers to relax.

"Nor would I ask you to be anything you are not," Hannibal said, and Will couldn't help but scoff softly. Hannibal's eyes narrowed a little in irritation. "All I have ever wanted was to help you to accept your own nature, William."

Will could argue that Hannibal had hurt him a hell of a lot more than helped, but it would probably be pointless. He felt Hannibal's fingers on his face, forcing Will to look at him and Will did so grudgingly. Still unsure exactly where this was going.

"We have very much in common. But we are not the same. We both enjoy killing." Will opened his mouth, but Hannibal held up a hand to silence him before he spoke. "But we do it for different reasons. You feel a need to preserve life just as strongly as a need to end it, and I must accept that if we are to continue on together."

Will remained silent, not disputing this, and Hannibal nodded slightly in approval.

"Therefore, I propose a compromise."

"What kind of a compromise?" Will asked cautiously.

Hannibal unbuckled his seat belt and began to get out of the car.

"Come with me. Leave..." Hannibal gave a resigned sigh, "Elvis in the car."

That made Will smile a little in spite of everything, even though he was reluctant to do what Hannibal was asking. A part of him very much wanted to take Hannibal up on his offer. To tell Hannibal, stop. To beg him to get back in the car and just drive. They could talk about this...whatever this was...later. But Hannibal was already walking towards the house without him. Will cursed under his breath as he got out of the car. The pup tried to follow him of course, barking when Will shut him inside the car, but it wasn't loud enough to be noticed by anyone in the darkened house.

It was more of a shack really, Will realized when he got a little closer and his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He was a little surprised anyone actually lived here. Boards warped and rotting. Shingles falling from the roof. Cracked windows. Mounds of trash and the smell of animal feces that made Will want to cover his nose. It must be even worse for Hannibal, but the man was as stoic about it as he was about everything.

They walked in silence around the back of the house and Will could make out what used to be the animal pens, though that was a generous term. The structure looked slapped together with whatever spare parts had been found lying around, and a strong wind might knock it over. The floors were dirt and mud, with no signs of bedding or anything to lessen the chill. Will could imagine the animals that used to inhabit them. Cold, wet, shivering in the night. Two or three animals crammed into spaces that weren't big enough for even one. Starving, fighting over what little scraps of meat were left on the bones thrown to them... Angry... Desperate... Afraid...

"I want to leave, Hannibal," Will hissed in the dark. Goosebumps rose on his arms and the back of his neck. He felt Hannibal's hand come to rest on the small of his back, but he pulled away from the touch with a small growl. He couldn't see Hannibal's expression clearly in the dark, but the man didn't try to touch him again.

"I promised you an explanation. I promise you, if you still want to leave after you hear it, we will leave," Hannibal said, and he actually sounded sincere. So Will clenched his jaw and nodded stiffly.

"Vernon Douglas has a criminal record. He is a convicted pedophile, released on parole eighteen months ago. When the first girl went missing, he was questioned and his home searched, but no evidence was uncovered linking Mr. Douglas to the girl's disappearance. Local law enforcement was forced to look elsewhere," Hannibal spoke calmly as he pulled out a pair of gloves and put them on. He handed a second pair to Will, but Will simply stood frozen in place staring at Hannibal.

"You think he has something to do with the missing girls?" He asked, and Hannibal nodded, "Why?"

"The police neglected to search one aspect of the property. Several months later, the animals were removed from the property by animal control. As I said, many of them did not make it. When I broke into the animal clinic and found your pup, I was curious. There were several of them waiting for disposal so I took the time to perform a quick autopsy on one of the dead animals to confirm my suspicions," Hannibal explained, walking up the creaking steps of the back porch.

"What suspicions?" Will asked horrified, already beginning to feel queasy.

"Look, Will. Tell me what you see," Hannibal said, gesturing towards the cages once more. As much as Will didn't want to look, didn't want to see, he found himself almost powerless not to. This was what he was. This was what he had always been meant for.

The pendulum swung and he saw the animals, more than a dozen of them, shivering in the cold. Mud clinging to their wet fur from the recent rains. They prowled the short distance from one end of the cage to the other. Snapping and growling at each other in hunger. They could smell the blood, even from this distance. The promise of food. The door on the back porch was thrown open and a man staggered out. The animals grew even more restless. There were whimpering cries of pain as the weaker animals were forced back by the stronger. The man laughed at the frothing mouths and snapping. He threw the first cuts of meat over the high fence and the feeding frenzy that erupted was just as violent as expected. Flesh was ripped from bone. Bones were twisted and broken as the animals fought over the far-too-small offering. Everything was consumed. Legs, arms, fingers, even teeth, nothing would remain...

Will came out of the vision with a harsh gasp, staggering from the force of it. He felt steadying hands on his shoulders and wrenched himself away without thought, almost slipping and falling onto the muddy ground he was shaking so hard.

"Will, look at me. Breathe. That's it," A familiar voice began to cut its way through the sound of his own near hyperventilating breathing. The hands returned, this time framing Will's face. Warm. Steadying. Grounding. Will blinked several times, forcing himself to focus on Hannibal's face. His voice.

"Oh my god..." Will choked out, swallowing several times against the bile rising in his throat.

"You saw?" Hannibal asked and Will nodded shakily. He no longer needed Hannibal to explain what he had found in the bellies of those animals. He felt sick. "Do you still wish to leave, Will?"

Everything suddenly snapped into a sharp, almost painful focus. The reason why Hannibal had brought him here. This wasn't like one of Jack's crime scenes. Where he was forced to look, to see the killer, and then was left trying to unsuccessfully purge the foul taint left behind on his psyche. There need not be days of sleepless nights, flashbacks of blood and death haunting his dreams, a poisonous rage bubbling just underneath his skin unable to be sated.

The man responsible wasn't far away, in some prison cell, put there by Jack, awaiting trial or punishment that would never be adequate recompense for his crimes. He was here. Now. Naively believing he had gotten away with his perverse crimes. Alana had once worried that Jack had let him get too close, when he'd killed Garret Jacob Hobs. Maybe the problem was, Will hadn't been allowed to get close enough since.

"No," Will said softly, a little surprised how steady his voice sounded. How clear his thoughts felt now that he had come to a decision. The same kind of clarity he'd felt when he and

Hannibal had faced off against the dragon together. This was right. This was his design. Their design.

Hannibal smiled and drew away. He followed Hannibal up the stairs, into the house, silent as death. Everywhere Will looked he could see echoes of the horrors that had happened inside the crumbling walls. The powerlessness of the children that had been trapped here. It reeked of fear. He felt tainted by the sick desires of the man who'd stolen them away from their families. He wanted to rip his skin off to remove it.

They found the child rapist alone in his bed asleep. He woke, cursing and flailing when Hannibal kicked him to the floor. It was almost pathetically easy to subdue the wretched filth. He was no dragon, but it would still be satisfying to remove the human stain from existence.

Will looked into the man's eyes, bound hand and foot, still cursing violently at them. Cursing them for invading his home. As though they were the monsters here. That was when Will realized...

He grabbed the man's thinning black hair and gave it a painful wrench.

"Where is she?" he demanded with a growl.

"I don't know what-ahhh!" The man screamed as Will shifted his hold to grab his ear, nearly ripping it off.

"I suggest you answer him, Mr. Douglas," Hannibal said calmly, standing back, watching Will.

"B...bb...basement..." the man cowardly began to blubber. Awkwardly gesturing with his bound hands.

"Go," Will ordered Hannibal who nodded. The elder man left the room and for a long time all that could be heard was the bound man's pathetic whimpering. Will was beginning to worry. "Hannibal?"

Just when he was ready to go look for Hannibal himself, he heard him call out.

"I found her. She will need medical attention."

Will let out a harsh breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding.

Alive...

More than could be said for the others.

"Get her out of here," Will ordered. There was near silence for a long time but then finally he heard the sound of the porch door swing open and shut. At that, Will reached down to grab the man who squealed in fright like the pig he was. Will dragged him into the kitchen, adrenaline and rage giving him the strength he might not have had otherwise, and threw the man on the ground. He ignored the man's pathetic pleading and grabbed the meat cleaver hanging on a hook by the sink. The same one the man had used on his victims. It was only

fitting. Will shoved a dirty rag into the man's mouth to muffle his screams, just in case the girl was awake and aware. She didn't need to hear this.

Will had given him explicit instructions. Hannibal smiled, impressed, as he tightened the last rope binding Mr. Douglas to the tree not far from his home. The man moaned pitifully, barely conscious due to blood loss despite the tourniquets tied around his severed arms and legs. He would not live for long, but hopefully he would live long enough.

Hannibal straightened and committed the beauty of Will's design to memory. Then he turned and left. The police would eventually find whatever the animals had not finished off. Or maybe they wouldn't. A fitting end for Mr. Douglas.

This time, Hannibal had not taken any trophies. Will had not wanted any, and Hannibal could not blame him. The piece of filth did not deserve that kind of honor. But there would be others. All in all, Hannibal was satisfied by the outcome. He heard the first wolf howl from the woods behind him and smiled.

Will was waiting for him back at the car. The girl was sleeping in the back seat with the pup thanks to the tranquilizers that Hannibal had given her. Will insisted that they take the girl home, and Hannibal agreed despite the risk.

Compromises. For Will, he was willing to make them.

Chapter 18

They stopped at a motel a little after dawn, nearly nine hours after leaving the girl's home.

Of course the parents had been overjoyed and relieved beyond measure to have their daughter returned. The girl's condition was stable, Hannibal had taken care of what physical wounds he could while Will drove. Though she would likely need additional medical attention, and most likely extensive therapy to recover from her ordeal. Hannibal had taken care of explaining to her parents the situation, and circumstances under which they'd rescued the girl. He'd also reassured them that the man responsible would not be capable of harming their daughter, or anyone else, ever again.

Hannibal had only made one request of the girl's parents before leaving. That they would wait at least an hour after he and Will departed before calling the police. They had been so grateful to have their daughter returned to them that they hardly cared one bit who Hannibal and Will were. The father had shaken both their hands and the mother had embraced them with tears in her eyes in thanks. Neither caring about the blood on Will and Hannibal's clothes.

Will's request had come as a little more of a surprise. Before leaving, Hannibal had watched curiously as Will handed over the squirming pup to the girl's father and asked if they would look after it for him. Or if they couldn't, if they would at least find a good home for the animal. The man had agreed. Hannibal wasn't sure that was a good idea, not many people would be able to handle such a 'pet' but the pup was Will's to do as he pleased.

The drive had been mostly silent, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Will seemed thoughtful rather than upset and Hannibal decided to leave him to his thoughts. Eventually Will closed his eyes and fell asleep with his head resting against the passenger window, only waking once they'd finally stopped.

Will remained in the car while Hannibal handled getting the room. Then he collected their bags while Will went into the room ahead of him. By the time Hannibal got there, he could already hear the shower running in the bathroom, a trail of Will's clothes on the floor leading there.

Hannibal began to wonder if he should be worried about Will's state of mind after all. He put down the bags and went over to the bathroom door. He knocked, and when Will didn't answer, he opened it. It was unlocked at least.

"Will? Is everything all right?" He asked from the doorway, not stepping inside just yet. The water in the shower was hot enough that the small room was already beginning to fill with steam. Will was in the shower, his head bent under the hot spray of water beating down over his head and shoulders. The clear glass door allowed Hannibal a splendid view of the younger man's toned body, nothing Hannibal hadn't seen before at this point, but still quite pleasing to the eye. Greedily Hannibal allowed himself to look, licking his lips as he watched the trails of water dripping down Will's muscles, stained faintly pink from the blood left on

the other man's skin. Right now Hannibal wanted nothing more than to follow those trails with his tongue.

He must have made a sound, or perhaps Will simply felt the weight of his gaze, because the younger man finally lifted his head and looked directly at him. Will's mind had never been an open book to him. He had only ever allowed Hannibal glimpses into his fascinating psyche, small tastes that always left him hungry for more. Now seemed to be no exception because he had no idea right now what Will was thinking. The other man's expression gave nothing away.

Finally Will moved to ease the sliding door open just a crack. The invitation clear.

Hannibal hesitated only a moment before he slipped inside the bathroom and closed the door firmly behind him. Locking them both into the confined space. He began to remove his clothes, one article at a time, leaving them almost haphazardly on the tiled floor. His eyes never left Will but the younger man did not look at him once. It was enough to give Hannibal second thoughts, for a moment at least, once he was finally naked. It was strangely thrilling. The uncertainty. Normally it would have been irksome at best, at worst…

He normally did not like not knowing what to expect. Yet with Will it was a double-edged sword. Will's unpredictable nature thrilled and fascinated him as much as it sometimes exasperated, or even angered, him. Yet, Will did not tell him to leave when Hannibal slid the shower door wider to allow himself inside. Did not correct his assumptions when he closed them both into that even smaller, more intimate space. Nor did Will tell him to stop when Hannibal stepped close enough to feel the warmth of the younger man's body. In fact, Will leaned back against his front, closing what little distance there had been between them. A low groan of pleasure escaped Hannibal's throat at the feeling of warm wet flesh pressing against him from chest to groin. His cock began to harden against Will's ass, something Will could surely feel, yet the younger man still did not step away.

Hannibal steadied Will with a hand on his hip, and allowed his lips to brush sensually along his wet shoulder. At the touch Will made a sound halfway between a groan and a purr. The younger man's dark head tilted back to rest against Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal took the invitation to kiss the long column of Will's neck. Feather light, soft suckles. Sometimes a gentle pinch of teeth. Hannibal closed his eyes. Savored the soft sighs, moans, and hisses, that escaped Will's mouth.

"What are you thinking about, Will?" Hannibal whispered, his curiosity finally getting the best of him. But that didn't stop him from allowing his lips to capture the tender lobe of Will's ear. His thumb caressed small circles over the younger man's hip. At first Will's only response was a low groan as he pushed his ass back against Hannibal's groin, causing the elder man's breath to hitch slightly.

"Not really thinking at all," Will finally murmured, sounding more relaxed than perhaps Hannibal had ever heard him.

"Oh?" Hannibal prompted further, unable to resist. Even as Will turned his head towards him and lifted his chin. Hannibal licked almost playfully at the plush lips parted so prettily in invitation. Will's next groan held a little more frustration than the last.

“Everything is quiet. It feels…right. I feel complete. Free…”

“I told you. It was all I ever wanted for you,” Hannibal whispered against Will’s mouth. Their lips brushing.

“You were right. I hate it when you’re right,” Will grumbled, though he didn’t sound all that convincing, earning a chuckle from the older man.

“I usually am,” he replied, and Will let out a soft snort. He kissed the younger man again, giving the lower lip a teasing suck, “You were beautiful. Breathtaking. An angel of vengeance covered in blood.”

“Just fucking kiss me already, damn it,” Will demanded, and who was he to refuse such an request?

He kissed Will as though he were trying to suck his soul right out of him. Lips almost bruising as his tongue tasted every inch of his mouth. But Will would not give up such a prize so easily. His tongue twined and thrusted back against his own. Teeth caught on swollen lips nearly sharp enough to draw blood.

Hannibal’s hands nearly bruised Will’s hips as he held the younger man tightly in place as he moved. His cock slid between the cheeks of the younger man’s firm ass, slid over his hole, and between his thighs, to nudge behind Will’s balls. Will groaned loudly at the feeling, his hands coming out to brace himself against the cool shower wall. The new position forced their lips apart, but allowed Will to push back against Hannibal’s dick. Will pressed his thighs closed, giving Hannibal a tight wet place to fuck. One of Hannibal’s hands left Will’s hip to close around his cock. The younger man was already so hard he was leaking.

Hannibal leaned over Will’s back, pressing the younger man even harder into the wall as he rutted against him. His teeth scraped along the side of Will’s neck and the other man whimpered. A pleading sound that resembled his name. Hannibal tightened his grip around Will’s cock and stroked the younger man faster. His balls slapped lewdly against the back of Will’s thighs. The space between Wills' legs grew even more slick with Hannibal’s pre-ejaculate.

“Yes, fuck, yes… Hannibal…fuck…” Will’s language became more obscene the closer he got to orgasm, but for once Hannibal did not care about the vulgarity. Finally Will stiffened, every muscle in his body drawing taunt, and as he threw his head back in a loud shout. His seed spilled over Hannibal’s hand hot and sticky. Hannibal milked Will through his orgasm while he to thrust between Will’s thighs, eventually coming himself. Almost silent. The image of his seed dripping down between Will’s legs was almost more satisfying than the orgasm itself.

“Beautiful,” Hannibal repeated breathlessly against the side of Will’s neck, his tongue darting out to lick at the slight indentations his teeth had left there. He knew he didn’t imagine the slight metallic taste of blood against the younger man's skin, but Will didn’t complain about the sting.

They remained that way for a long time, until the water was noticeably cooler than before. Only then did they reluctantly part and Hannibal began to tend to Will's washing, much as he had when the younger man had been too weak to do so himself. Will allowed him to do so passively, though often leaning into Hannibal's touch, or lifting his chin for a kiss when they were close, which Hannibal gave readily.

When they left the shower it was well into morning, but neither really cared about the hour. After Hannibal shut the room-darkening drapes they curled up in the bed together, kissing and touching. Slowly exploring new territory and savoring every moment of it. Eventually they slept, legs tangled together and Hannibal's arm draped possessively around Will's waist.

Both men felt content together in ways they never had separate.

Jack found himself sitting at his desk again. Once more staring at the monitor of his computer. The image of Hannibal and Will standing together almost intimately at the edge of a cliff, once more frozen on the screen. On his desk there were several files. Some opened, gruesome photos spilling out over the edges.

The Chesapeake Ripper's spree of latest victims.

There was a knock on his office door, and it opened when he gave permission to enter. Price and Zeller walked in together, wearing matching grim expressions.

"What have you got?" Jack asked reluctantly. Hoping, praying, he was wrong.

Price cleared his throat, there was a report in his hand, but he didn't look at it before speaking, "DNA came back on the blood we found on those sheets stuffed in the trash in that motel room. Some of it was Will's. Some of it belonged to the two victims we found next door. Time of death was about twenty four hours before the victims at the convenience store."

Zeller picked up where Price left off.

"We've also determined the murder weapon for the couple. A scalpel found at the scene. We got a positive hit on the prints… it had Will Graham's finger prints on it."

"Any chance the evidence was planted?" Jack asked.

"Well, there's always a chance," Price said, though he didn't sound like he believed it himself.

"Something else. Turns out there was a phone call made from the victim's room, right around the time of death. We're getting the records pulled now."

Jack nodded.

"I want to know the minute you know who that call was made to."

It was dark and the smell of decay was heavy in the air.

Freddie Lounds covered her nose and mouth with her hand, trying not to gag at the stench. The bodies had been there days at least. Two with bullet holes in their skulls. More than one man was disemboweled. One man was missing his face…

It was one of the most gruesome things she'd ever seen. Between the sight and the smell it was all she could do not to vomit.

It didn't stop her from taking the pictures.

She swallowed back the bile in her throat as she took out her phone and dialed a number. A few moments later, she heard a tinny ringtone from one of the bodies. She hung up, approached the body, and snapped on a pair of latex gloves before she started going through the man's pockets. She found what she was looking for rather easily. A cell phone. Her number in the most recent missed call record. There were several other calls from her phone listed as well, including the first one she'd made when hiring the men for the job.

She stood, placed the phone in a small plastic bag she'd brought with her, and slipped it into her purse. She then quickly made her way out of the abandoned storefront. Relieved when she was finally able to breathe fresh air again.

Once she was outside, she looked down at her own phone still clutched tightly in her hand. She wondered if she should call…to tell him it was done. To…thank him. He probably wouldn't answer. He hadn't answered the last time she'd tried to return his call. Not from either number. It would probably be pointless.

The last call had been brief. Just an address and the insinuation that it would be in her best interest to go there. The first call had been far more of a surprise. She hadn't spoken to him since…Chilton. A shiver crawled unpleasantly down her spine recalling the doctor's fate. It could have so easily been her in his place, had the Dragon decided to punish her instead of Dr. Chilton for the insults in the article she'd written. She hadn't even recognized his voice at first. His request –demand – had been even more shocking.

The threat to her life if she failed to comply had been more than implied. Any other person, she might have laughed it off. She'd heard plenty of threats before. But not like this. It was just like in Wolf Trap. She'd never felt terror like that before, or since. She thought he really *was* going to kill her back then. Now... she knew he would if she didn't do what he asked.

Of course it wasn't just the threat that had made her comply. It had been his promise to give her what she'd always wanted. Better yet, this time she wouldn't just be reporting it. She would have access, details, that no one else ever would. First hand knowledge. The story of a lifetime. It was just too good to pass up, despite the danger.

So she had done as he asked. Made the arrangements he told her to make. Found those men and sent them to the address Will Graham had given her with one simple instruction.

Kill Hannibal Lecter.

Author's Note

Author's Note:

If you've made it this far, thank you very much for reading my fic. I hope you enjoyed it.

As mentioned at the beginning of this fic, this story was meant to be the first of a series, that I never got around to writing. Since it is doubtful I'll ever finish it, I thought I'd post a brief summary of what I intended to happen, and answer any questions readers might have, since I know I kept things pretty vague, because I intended on explaining them further as the story progressed.

Q. What is going on with Will?

A. Basically after all the years of trauma, combined with his recent serious head injury, Will is starting to suffer from dissociative identity disorder. This 'other' Will is doing some very bad things that 'real' Will is not aware of. The 'other' Will is very angry, and doesn't like Hannibal very much. He doesn't have any problem with leaving a trail of bodies behind them, and trying to get Hannibal caught and killed. Basically what Hannibal was trying to convince Will he was doing back in Season 1, which is kind of ironic. It's not so much fun when it's actually happening. Hannibal is unaware of this at first, but eventually figures out what is going on. The rest of the story was supposed to revolve around Hannibal having to deal with this new alternate personality of Will. Somewhat becoming Will's therapist again, in an attempt to get rid of, or at least make peace with the new personality. I had one scene in particular planned out where Hannibal has to tie Will to a chair during a session with the 'other' Will, because he won't stop causing trouble/attacking Hannibal.

Q. Did Will really kill the people in the motel room next to theirs? When did he do it?

A. Yes, and no. He killed them, but he was unaware of doing it. The panic attack Hannibal witnessed came after the fact. His mind not able to cope with what he was doing. I don't know if that's scientifically accurate or not. Probably not, but that's how I intended it to be interpreted. That's why other people's blood was found on the sheets in their motel room by the police. Yes, 'other' Will is also responsible for contacting Freddy and setting Hannibal up to be killed.

Q. What's the difference between 'normal' Will and 'other' Will?

A. Basically Normal Will is the one we've all come to know and love. Normal Will is in love with Hannibal, even though he knows he shouldn't be. Normal Will doesn't have a problem killing someone as long as he feels they 'deserve' it, which was the compromise that Hannibal has decided to make. Other Will hates Hannibal. Other will is much more angry, manipulative, and reckless than Normal Will. Other Will doesn't have a problem with killing 'innocent' people, as long as it helps him achieve his goal. Which is mainly killing Hannibal.

Q. What does Hannibal think of the 'other' Will?

A. At first Hannibal is unaware that Will has developed this alternate personality that is apparently out to get him. But after a while it becomes impossible to hide the trail of bodies the 'other' will is leaving behind that Hannibal knows he's not responsible for. Eventually he will figure it out and confront/catch the 'other' Will in the act. Hannibal is more than a little intrigued by the 'other' Will, at first. Maybe even amused by him. This will undoubtedly cause some friction between Hannibal and 'normal' Will, who probably thinks Hannibal prefers his more ruthless side over how he normally is, and might even want that personality to become his dominant one. But Hannibal will eventually decide he doesn't much care for the 'other' Will and will do what he can to deal with the other Will so he can get his Will back.

Any other questions? Feel free to ask. I didn't plan everything out ahead of time though so I might not have every answer. If anyone wants to use any of these ideas, feel free. If anyone knows of any stories with a similar premise, let me know, I'd love to read it.

Thanks again!

End Notes

I've recently started work on an original project that I hope to see published one day. If anyone would like to receive more information on this as it becomes available, or would like to sign up to beta read for me in the future, check my profile for my email address. Thanks!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!